GILGAMESH

A MUSICAL EPIC

The Journey of a Thesis Show

Peter Petkovšek

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

in the Theatre Arts Program of the School of the Arts

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

April 27, 2015

Supervisors: Anne Bogart and Brian Kulick

Introduction

Some ten years ago, I went to see a peculiar play in one of the more experimental theatres in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The play was called *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and happened not on their main stage, but in a small thrust-like space in an old, abandoned post office building. The actors played in a sandbox filled with brilliantly white salt and, embodying the characters of ancient Babylonian gods, told us the story of the hero Gilgamesh who wanted to become immortal. It was exquisite and to this day I remember it as one of the best pieces of theatre I have ever experienced. Somehow the space, the story, the visuals and the state I was in at the time all aligned and created something I would never forget.

Since then, Gilgamesh has been tucked away somewhere in the depths of the curves of my grey matter, waiting for a moment when he could spring out and become a story I told in my own way. When I thought about thesis possibilities for my Columbia MFA, he sensed the opportunity and resurfaced, whispering in my inner ear. He was convincing, and after some thought I decided it was time to face him and have that be the pinnacle of my directing studies.

The essay that follows is organized in two large parts. The first one, more academically structured, pertains to the research I did about and around Gilgamesh. I give a historic and contextual explanation about the original Epic, and analyze some of the themes I was thinking about while making this show. The second is a personal account of how I experienced the process of the show, what issues came up, what was new to me, what questions I had, and how it all went. It is loosely structured in a chronological way, but mostly I followed my stream of thoughts wherever it led me.

It has been quite a journey; not just Gilgamesh, but the whole MFA in Directing. It feels as if it has flown by in the blink of an eye, and yet, when I think about the scene work we were doing in the first semester of the first year, it seems like it happened ages ago. I have aged, grown, acquired experience and hopefully learned a thing or two. I have met new friends that I hope to keep for life, and new mentors that I am thankful to for all their guidance and advice. It has been exciting, stressful, exhilarating, depressing, uplifting, challenging, revealing, intense and above all, creative. I'm not sure what comes next, but I'm ready to find out.

Peter Petkovšek

New York, April 27, 2015

Table of Contents

I. Research

The Epic of Gilgamesh: History, Context and Themes

History

> The Gilgamesh epic is a powerful tale in almost any telling. Rilke once called it the greatest thing one could experience, and many consider it the supreme literary achievement of the ancient world before Homer. It has something of the qualities Henry Moore once said he admired in Mesopotamian Art –bigness and simplicity without decorative trimming. It is about nature and culture, the value of human achievements and their limitations, friendship and love, separation and sorrow, life and death.[1]

The words of a reviewer from the New York Times Book Review capture some of the enthusiasm with which the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (EG) has been received from the 19th century, when it was rediscovered, onward. It is perhaps fitting that one of the oldest and greatest stories about humanity came to light in the era of the Romantics and their search for individualism, rebellion, and a much deeper and darker relationship with Nature. It was love at first sight, backed by the dramatic journey of the text itself.

The rise of archeology in the first half of the 19th century saw excavations happen not only, famously, in Egypt, starting with Napoleon's occupation, but also in the Middle East. A British adventurer, Austen Henry Layard, uncovered the remains of the palace of King Ashurbanipal, an Assyrian ruler from the 7th century B.C. He had discovered the ruins of Nineveh (in the northern part of modern-day Iraq), a city mentioned in the Bible and destroyed in 612 B.C[2]. In 1853, Layard's former assistant Hormuzd Rassam excavated perhaps the most precious part of the palace: a library containing thousands of clay tablets, a collection of texts from ancient empires, which were sent to the British Museum.

In a similar manner as had done before Jean-Francois Champollion with hieroglyphs, a British Army officer and later Member of Parliament Sir Henry Rawlinson deciphered cuneiform script, a form of writing using blunt reeds to create wedge-like marks in clay, which was the prevailing form of writing on the excavated tablets. This allowed actual studies of the tablets and in 1872 Rawlinson's assistant and successor George Smith, a former banknote engraver and self-taught Assyriologist, deciphered a tablet that referred to a "flood and a ship that settled on a mountaintop"[3]. On December 3rd of that year he

[1] qtd in Abusch, Tzvi. 'Ishtar's Proposal and Gilgamesh's Refusal: An Interpretation of "The Gilgamesh Epic", Tablet 6, Lines 1-79', in *History of Religions* 26 (1986), 2, (143-187), pp. 143-144
[2] Ziolkowski, Theodore. *Gilgamesh Among Us: Modern Encounters With the Ancient Epic*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2011, p. 8
[3] Ziolkowski 2011, p. 9

presented a famous talk for the Society of Biblical Archeology, entitled 'A Chaldean[4] History of the Flood'. The find was thought so important that the British Prime Minister William Gladstone himself attended. This was the first reintroduction to the world of Gilgamesh, since Smith had already started to realize that the fragments he deciphered were passages detailing the adventures of a king (whom he called 'Izdubar', a misreading of the cuneiform version of Gilgamesh), and that there were twelve distinct chapters, each on separate tablets, the eleventh of which was the account of the flood. His talk sparked much interest and funding from the *Daily Telegraph* for another expedition to Nineveh, where Smith almost immediately found a fragment with the rest of the flood story and other additions to the 'Izdubar' story. After having deciphered and put together more fragments, he published a book titled *The Chaldean Account of Genesis* (1875), in which he presented a full account of the twelve tablets.

Although Smith's main point of interest was the story of the flood and its comparison to its Biblical counterpart, and furthermore, although his first full translation of the Epic differs greatly from the fuller and more detailed Gilgamesh story we know today (which only goes to show how complex the translating of cuneiform script can be), he can be seen as the modern 'father' of EG and the crucial person figuring in its reintroduction into society.

After Smith, interest in Gilgamesh continued to rise as more fragments were deciphered, new translations[5] were published, and the text started to settle as well as become more available to the general public (in the beginning, mostly German speakers, since some of the earliest comprehensive translations were published in Germany). From the interest of historians and religious scholars and who debated the flood account as a possible source for the Bible, to psychologists such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung who tested their theories of the unconscious against the mythical material, EG finally captured the imagination of poets and artists and started an incredibly rich and widespread reception: "The spell of Gilgamesh captured many since Rilke so that over the years the story has been

[4] 'Chaldean' is the Hellenistic name for the region of Southeast Mesopotamia

[5] Among others, the main German and English translations: Alfred Jeremias' *Izdubar-Nimrod* from 1891 (first German translation); Morris Jastrow's *Religion of Babylon and Assyria* in 1898 (first partial translation into English; Peter Jensen's German translation from 1900; Arthur Ungnad's *Das Gilgamesch-Epos* from 1911; Stephen Langdon's partial translation from 1917; Hermann Ranke's German translation from 1924; Erich Ebeling's scholarly translation from 1926; R. Campbell Thompson's first complete English translation from 1928; Albert Schott's *das Gilgamesch-Epos* from 1934; Nancy Sandars' *The Epic of Gilgamesh* from 1960; John Gardner's and John Maier's *Gilgamesh: From the Sîn-Lequi-Unninnî Version* from 1984; Robert Temples *He Who Saw Everything* from 1991; Andrew George's *The Epic of Gilgamesh* from 1999, and Stephan Maul's *Das Gilgamesch-Epos* from 2005.

variously reworked into plays, novels and at least two operas. Translations have now appeared in at least sixteen languages and more appear year by year."[6]

The text we have today is a compilation that encompasses fragments pertaining to different eras, cultures and empires stretching through a history of several centuries. Most of the tablets were found in the region of ancient Mesopotamia, the area around the system of rivers Tigris and Euphrates, covering modern-day Iraq and Kuwait as well as parts of Syria, Turkey and Iran. The earliest text-based findings that can be called literature (albeit in a very basic sense of the term) go back to around 2600 B.C. when two main languages were spoken in the region: Sumerian and Akkadian. Sumerian was the older of the two, while Akkadian slowly became more prevalent, helped by its making of the official administrative language by King Sargon who founded the first great Mesopotamian empire around 2300 B.C., and finally becoming the only spoken language after the rise to prominence of the city of Babylon and its most famous king, Hammurabi, in the 18th century B.C. Sumerian, however, remained as a language of literature and culture (similar to the status of Greek in the later Roman Empire) and a learning tool for budding scribes. As George notes, there existed a proverb that said, 'A scribe who knows no Sumerian, what kind of scribe is he?'[7]

It is through these student scribes that the older, Sumerian, texts about Gilgamesh were preserved into later times and ultimately until the present. The timeline of the formation of EG slowly comes into focus. Although the character of Gilgamesh is a clearly deified and heroic invention, a list of kings of the dynasty of Uruk that was found on some of the tablets has more or less confirmed suggestions that there indeed existed a historic person, a king who went by the name Gilgamesh. He is the fifth king on the list: "Meskiaggasher inaugurated the dynasty of Uruk. Relative chronology allows scholars to date this semi-legendary personality to 2700 B. C."[8] The list also features names such as Lugalbanda and Tummuz, two other deified heroes that feature in various legends and adventure stories from the region. This was a time when myth slowly turned into history: much before the dynasty of Uruk, various lists give us names of the rulers before the great flood, which was survived by only one person, Uta-napishti (a predecessor, or at least analogue of Noah from Hebrew tradition), and his family. One of these, named Enmenluana, supposedly reigned a whopping 46,000 years. As we approach the

[6] George, Andrew. The Introduction to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. London, New York: Penguin Books, 1999, III (2003), p. xiv. I am using George's translation for all the quotes from EG.
[7] George 2003, p. xv
[8] Sasson, Jack M. 'Some Literary Motifs in the Composition of the Gilgamesh Epic', in *Studies in Philology* 69 (1972), 3, (259-279), p. 260

contemporary time of the scribes documenting royal history, lengths of the king's reigns become more accurate. Gilgamesh is the last king on the list whose reign (126 years) exceeds natural expectations; his successor Ur-Nungal is listed as having reigned for thirty years, the king after that (Udul-kalama), only fifteen.

This distinction establishes the historic reality of Gilgamesh, although it is precisely *because* of the EG and its long life that we know extremely little about the actual king Gilgamesh, and can only venture some guessing hypotheses about his life. One of the principle ones, supported by archeological evidence, would be that he had some part in the building of fortifications of the city of Uruk, as Sasson notes: "Precisely during the 'heroic age of Sumer', a period in which Gilgamesh is presumed to have lived, great fortifications were raised."[9] More importantly however, the lists show us the significance of a king who reigned through a period of change, an element to note once the various interpretations of EG are addressed.

The first stories about Gilgamesh were most likely written down in the 20th century B.C., long after the historic king had died and been deified through legend. It is easy to assume that oral versions of those stories had circulated the region a while before they were set in clay, originating perhaps even just a few decades after the death of the king[10]. There are five of these legends, written in Sumerian, where Gilgamesh is called 'Bilgamesh', functioning as independent stories about the adventures of the king[11]: *Bilgamesh and Akka* (where Bilgamesh successfully defeats the hegemonic claims of Akka, the ruler of the city-state of Kish)*, Bilgamesh and Huwawa* (where Bilgamesh and his servant Enkidu fight the monster Huwawa)*, Bilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven* (where Bilgamesh comes in conflict with the goddess Inanna and defeats the Bull of Heaven)*, Bilgamesh and the Netherworld* (where Bilgamesh's servant Enkidu descends into the Netherworld to acquire some lost objects)*,* and *The Death of Bilgamesh* (where a dying Gilgamesh is judged by the gods and given a special position in the Netherworld as the chief of the shades, judging other dead humans)*.*

[9] Sasson 1972, p. 262
[10] Sasson 1972, p. 262
[11] In antiquity, these poems were known more by their *incipits*: *The Envoys of Akka; The Lord to the Living One's Mountain; Hero in Battle; In Those Days, in Those Far-Off Days,* and *The Great Wild Bull is Lying Down*. I'm following George's translations of these verses.

While the Babylonian scribes were learning to write with the help of these Sumerian stories, there already existed an Akkadian (which was the official language of the Babylonian empire) comprehensive version of the Epic from around the 18th century B.C. Of this version, from the so-called Old Babylonian period, we possess only a few fragments – just enough to know it had already existed before the Middle Babylonian period, during which the 'Standard Version' of EG, or the version that is still most common today, was compiled. The Standard Version is usually attributed to a master scribe and poet named Sîn-liqe-unninni (the name means 'O Moon God, Accept my Prayer!'[12]), who is supposed to have put it together somewhere in the 13th century B.C. While the Old Babylonian text was already a compilation of the Sumerian stories with name changes from Sumerian to Akkadian (Bilgamesh becomes Gilgamesh, Huwawa becomes Humbaba, Inanna becomes Ishtar and so on), the Standard Version is a heavily edited and revised version with additions and changes. It keeps most of the plot material from two of the five Sumerian stories, *Bilgamesh and Huwawa* and *BIlgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*, and adds more material on the creation of Enkidu, who is promoted from Gilgamesh's servant to his rival, friend, and perhaps equal, as well as Gilgamesh's travels after Enkidu's death. But most of all, it adds the story of Uta-napishti[13] and the great flood, which to most early Gilgamesh scholars represented the most important part of the Epic, seen in connection with the Biblical account of the deluge. The text is taken from another epic, also written down in the Old Babylonian period: the *Atra-Hasis*, named after its chief protagonist who is included as one of the antediluvian kings in the afore-mentioned lists of kings. The *Atra-Hasis* contains the story of creation as well as the first calamities to be brought upon humans by the gods, including and in most detail, the great flood. A slightly adapted version of the latter became tablet XI (the final tablet) of the Standard Version of EG, woven together with the journey of Gilgamesh who decides to try and find Uta-napishti and learn his secret.

Summary of the Epic

In order to achieve clarity in referencing in the literary analysis of EG, it will help to summarize with slightly more detail the contents of the eleven tablets of the Standard Version of EG.

Tablet I opens with an ode to Gilgamesh, praising him as the one who "saw the Deep"[14] or the 'Abyss', the wise one and the one who "brought back a tale of before the Deluge"[15]. Gilgamesh is two thirds

[12] George 2003, p. xxiv
[13] Also transcribed as 'Utnapishtim' in many translations
[14] EG Tablet I, verse 1
[15] EG Tablet I, verse 8

divine and one third human, he built the wall of Uruk, he is strong and mighty, and his travails are written down on tablets of lapis lazuli. However, he seems to be too much for his people since he "lets no son go free to his father" and "no daughter free to her mother"[16]. The people therefore ask the gods for help, and the mother goddess Aruru creates a human called Enkidu as a challenger. A trapper spies Enkidu in the forest and the report reaches Gilgamesh. The king tells the harlot[17] Shamhat to seek Enkidu out in order to tame him. She does so by sleeping with him for six days and seven nights. Then she tells him about Uruk and Gilgamesh, who has been having prophetic dreams about Enkidu. These dreams are interpreted by Gilgamesh's mother Ninsun, a minor goddess (the 'Wild Cow') as favorable.

Tablet II returns to Enkidu who is being taught human culture by Shamhat. She gives him clothes and teaches him how to eat bread and drink ale, whereupon "his mood became free, he started to sing / his heart grew merry, his face lit up"[18], arguably the first description of a drunk person in human history. He learns that Gilgamesh takes the *droit de seigneur*, or right of first night, meaning he sleeps with the brides of Uruk on their wedding nights. Outraged, Enkidu decides to go to Uruk and challenge Gilgamesh. He enters Uruk with a rabble of people and bars the way so that Gilgamesh cannot pass. They fight but the outcome is unclear because of a lacuna in the fragment – when the text resumes, Gilgamesh is kneeling, but it is hard to say if he is doing so because he is pinning Enkidu down or because he has lost the match. In any case, immediately after the fight Enkidu speaks with respect to Gilgamesh and the two become friends. Gilgamesh proposes to slay the monster Humbaba who lives in the Cedar forest. Enkidu is against the idea but Gilgamesh coaxes him into agreeing and together they forge weapons and armor for the trip. The Elders of Uruk advise against trying to conquer the ferocious monster.

In Tablet III, the Elders give in and commend Gilgamesh to Enkidu. Gilgamesh asks his mother Ninsun for her blessing, and she prays to the Sun god Shamash to help Gilgamesh by arousing the Winds against Humbaba. Ninsun also adopts Enkidu as her son, effectively making him Gilgamesh's brother. The two heroes depart.

Tablet IV describes the journey to the Cedar forest. Both heroes are strong and they travel fast. Only every three days do they pitch camp and rest on the slope of a mountain. When they do, Gilgamesh

[16] EG Tablet I, verse 72
[17] Sacred prostitute
[18] EG Tablet II, verse 105

prays for divine signs and provokes dreams which all describe some sort of disaster. He has five such dreams. Enkidu, however, always interprets the dream as positive in terms of slaying Humbaba. They finally reach the forest, where Shamash urges them to attack Humbaba while he does not have his seven protective cloaks or 'auras' on him. The two heroes falter but encourage each other: "Why, my friend, do we speak like weaklings? / Was it not we who crossed all the mountains? / Did not … before us?"[19]

In Tablet V we learn about the fight with Humbaba. The tablet is very fragmentary and by the time the text picks up, Humbaba is speaking to the heroes, insulting them: "Come Enkidu, you spawn of a fish, who knew no father / hatchling of terrapin and turtle, who sucked no mother's milk! / In your youth I watched you, but near you I went not / would your … have filled my belly?"[20] The god Shamash helps by bringing in thirteen winds and immobilizing Humbaba who pleads for his life, offering himself to Gilgamesh as a servant. Gilgamesh listens, but it is Enkidu who urges him to kill the monster, and the two do so together. They chop down the cedars and make a raft where they put Humbaba's head.

Tablet VI corresponds to the Sumerian story about Bilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven. Gilgamesh washes and puts on new clothes, and the goddess Ishtar offers him to be her husband, promising great riches. Gilgamesh, however refuses, insulting her and mentioning past lovers that she had destroyed: "You loved the speckled *allallu*-bird, / but struck him down and broke his wing / now he stands in the woods crying 'My wing!'"[21] Ishtar is furious and demands retribution from her father, the god of sky Anu. She threatens to open the gates of the Netherworld if he doesn't give her the Bull of Heaven, which he does. She releases the Bull which immediately starts to cause destruction, but Gilgamesh and Enkidu manage to kill it and sacrifice its meat to Anu. Moreover, Enkidu tears a haunch off the Bull and hurls it at Ishtar who mourns the bull.

In Tablet VII, Enkidu has a foreboding dream where the gods decide that he must die as punishment for the deaths of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Feverish, he curses the wooden door they had made from the cedars; the hunter; and Shamhat, but after an intervention by Shamash he calms down and blesses her. He has a vision of death, "A man there was, grim his expression / just like a Thunderbird his

[19] EG Tablet IV, verses 243-245
[20] EG Tablet V, verses 87-90
[21] EG Tablet VI, verses 48-50

features were frightening"[22] who leads him into the 'House of Dust'. He falls ill and dies after twelve days, bewailing the fact that he is not dying in battle.

Tablet VIII is a description of the funeral and mourning of Enkidu. Gilgamesh has a long eulogy about his friend, and proceeds to make a funerary statue as well as, amidst prayers, provide his friend with many riches and gold for the Netherworld.

In Tablet IX, Gilgamesh is confronted with his own mortality and his fear propels hi to action: "I'm afraid of death, so I wander the wild / to find Uta-napishti, son of Ubar-Tutu."[23] He arrives at the Twin Mountains of Mashu and is confronted by Scorpion-men, guarding the gates to the passage. Sensing the divine in him, they let him through and he travels for twelve double hours through darkness, after which he reaches a garden of paradise.

In Tablet X, Gilgamesh reaches the sea-shore where a wise old goddess, Siduri (the 'Barmaid') lives in a tavern. After he threatens to break down the door, she lets him in and he relates the story of Enkidu his death. She advises him to enjoy life as much as he can, but at length tells him of Urshanabi the boatman who could take him to Uta-napishti. Gilgamesh finds Urshanabi and with the help of wooden poles, crosses the ocean and the Waters of Death to arrive at Uta-napishti's, who chastises him for his foolishness: "Enkidu indeed they took to his doom. / But you, you toiled away, and what did you achieve? / You exhaust yourself with ceaseless toil, you fill your sinews with sorrow / bringing forward the end of your days."[24]

The final tablet, Tablet XI, is the famous account of the flood. Uta-napishti promises to tell him the secret of his immortality, which is the story of the deluge. The great gods sent down the deluge to destroy mankind, but the god of wisdom Ea, seemingly speaking to a fence made of reed, warned Uta-napishti of what was to come and told him to build a boat. Uta-napishti built the boat in seven days and brings board animals and craftsmen. The deluge came and it was terrible; even the gods were frightened of what they had done. After seven days the storm subsided and Uta-napishti let out three birds. The third one, a raven, did not return, meaning it had found land. Uta-napishti sacrificed to the gods (who gathered around like flies) and the god Enlil who had been the most responsible for the flood, calmed his own wrath and rewarded Uta-napishti and his wife with immortality. But, Uta-napishti tells

[22] EG Tablet VII, verses 168-169
[23] EG Tablet IX, verses 5-6
[24] EG Tablet X, verses 298-300

Gilgamesh, nothing like that will ever happen again. He challenges him to stay awake for six days and seven nights, which the hero fails to do miserably, and sleeps for the same amount of time, during which Uta-napishti's wife bakes a loaf of bread for each day. When he wakes up, Uta-napishti instructs Urshanabi to clean him up and take him home. As Gilgamesh is sailing away, Uta-napishti, to the bequest of his wife, tells him of a plant that grows at the bottom of the ocean, which rejuvenates whoever consumes it. Gilgamesh dives into the water and finds the flower. He intends to take it to Uruk and give it to an old man, then try it out himself. However, as he pitches camp on the way next to a pool of water, a serpent comes, having smelled the flower, and steals it, sloughing its skin. Gilgamesh returns to Uruk without the flower, but contents himself by showing the city's ramparts to Urshanabi, thus concluding the Standard Version with the same image that it begins with: that of the wall, a great achievement which will bring Gilgamesh's name immortality.

The eleven tablet version of Sîn-liqe-unninni is the most widespread one still today. There exists, however a Tablet XII. It appears to have been added later and it is in fact a line-by-line translation of part of the old Sumerian story, *BIlgamesh and the Netherworld*. In it, Enkidu descends into the Netherworld, and when Gilgamesh manages to conjure up his spirit, they have a dialogue where Gilgamesh questions his friend about the people he has met on the other side. Tablet XII has been a point of dissention. George argues that, "Though some have tried to show that Tablet XII had a real place in the epic, most scholars would agree that it does not belong to the text but was attached to it because it was plainly related material."[25] The arguments against include those of the Epic already having a clear ending; of broken continuity by Enkidu, who is suddenly alive again; and of the fact that it is a mechanical add-on from the Sumerian poem. Others, however, see the development of the Epic as a shifting in its focus: "The basic conflict is that between the extraordinary and the normal. In the Old Babylonian version, the conflict is that of hero versus man; in the eleven-tablet version, it is that of hero versus king; and in the twelve-tablet version, it is that of hero versus god."[26] Or again some see it as a sort of epilogue, confirming Gilgamesh's final acceptance of his role in the world: "In a manner analogous to (though also very different from) the satyr plays presented following Greek tragedies, the Descent into the

[25] George 2003, p. xxviii
[26] Abusch, Tzvi. 'The Development and Meaning of the Epic of Gilgamesh: An Interpretive Essay', in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121 (2001), 4, (614-622), p. 616

Netherworld presents a change in tone and a release of tensions, allowing time for the audience to understand what has transpired"[27]

Themes and motifs in EG

A text stemming so far back and layered by the time, space and people it has traversed, is clearly a bottomless well for someone who wishes to extract its essence and present it in another art form. Before delving into the process that has created *Gilgamesh: A Musical Epic*, the question that needs to be answered is, what are the themes that EG explores? Why is it important? A brief overview of the main questions posed by the Epic will help with understanding the dilemmas and challenges faced during its adaptation and staging. Most of the motifs and issues covered will fall under two larger categories: a) Identity and Otherness, and b) Shift and Growth; both categories are of course connected: Identity will Change through Growth and Shift when it is confronted by Otherness.

Identity and Otherness

The question of identity is omnipresent in EG. The journey of Gilgamesh is one of self-discovery. Who is he? "For in addition to being a hero, Gilgamesh is also a man, a king, and a god, and he must come to terms with these several identities."[28] He is presented as two thirds god and one third human, a division that puts him neither in one nor the other world completely. When we meet him at the start of the Epic, he is fulfilling a role of the divine warrior of old, a mythological hero. And yet the very same qualities that serve him as a hero are coming in the way of his status as a ruler of people. His endless energy is wearing his subjects out; he is like a child with an Attention Deficit Disorder, or an insomniac: "What Gilgamesh has is not just an inability to sleep, but an inability to stop, or even to see the desirability of stopping."[29] With no thought to the consequences of his actions, he uses Uruk and those around him as a sandbox to play in. This creates a breach between his perspective of the world and that of the audience, leading us to literary irony, "the profound discordance between the hero's view of himself and his world, and the audience's understanding of this world, the audience's foreknowledge of the hero's

[27] Vulpe, Nicola. 'Irony and the Unity of the Gilgamesh Epic', in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 53 (1994), 4, (275-283), p. 283
[28] Abusch 2001, p. 616
[29] Deagon, Andrea. 'The Twelve Double Hours of Night: Insomnia and Transformation in "Gilgamesh", in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 1 (1998), 3/4, (461-489), p. 469

fate."[30] As in Greek tragedy, we know what he does not know, and we get to watch him struggle as he tries to come to terms with that knowledge. But at the beginning he is blissfully unaware of his own fate.

From a more psycho-analytic approach, he can be seen as the anti-force against the unconscious: "The people, as the indiscriminate many, against the outstanding one, the king, symbolize the unconscious, the instinctive forces, which are here shown in a deplorable state of suppression by an ego possessed by an ambitious self-assigned task."[31] The self-assigned task is achieving great deeds, becoming famous, and living up to the identity of the warrior demigod, such as building the mighty ramparts of Uruk. Right at the very start his identity is already threefold: a mix of god and man, he is also called the "wild bull on the rampage"[32] and identified as the son of the 'Wild Bull' Lugalbanda, and the 'Wild Cow' Ninsun. All three aspects are thus already in him, and the Epic will in fact be a battle between them, a struggle that will bring him from animal-god to man, from hero to king, from the unconscious to individual.

As any identity, he is defined by negatives, by the gaze of others. He is described to us by the narrating voice in EG, then by the people of Uruk, then by Shamhat to Enkidu, then by Enkidu himself, and so on. In fact, his speaking role in the first few tablets is limited: he only says one command to the Trapper in Tablet I while the dreams he has been having are narrated by Shamhat. The first time Gilgamesh actually speaks in a more substantial way is in the middle of Tablet II when he urges Enkidu to go and fight Humbaba. A closer look at the whole first half of EG tells us that the moment when Gilgamesh says more than just a verse or two, happens only in Tablet VI, the middle of the Epic, when he replies to Ishtar's offer. Why is that so? How come the presence of the titular hero of the text is barely acknowledged by himself until the narration is already halfway through? It signifies that up until that moment, nothing major has changed for him. Or to be more precise, things have already changed, but he has not been forced to make any real decisions yet. The one thing that has changed, that has been set in motion, is that he has met his Double, his Other – Enkidu.

Enkidu is presented to us as the 'beast-man', the creation of the gods who is more animal than human at the start of his short existence: "All his body is matted with hair / he bears long tresses like those of a woman / the hair on his head grows thickly as barley / he knows not a people, nor even a country."[33] He

[30] Vulpe 1994, p. 278
[31] Kluger, Rivkah Schärf. *Gilgamesh: The Archetypal Significance of A Modern Ancient Hero* (ed. H. Yehezkel Kluger). Einsiedeln: Daimon Verlag, 1991, p. 27
[32] EG Tablet I, verse 30
[33] EG Tablet I, verses 105-108

is a representative of nature against Gilgamesh's culture, the unconscious against the ego, the instinct against rational thought, earth against light, the feminine against the masculine. The first to discover him is the Trapper and after the narrator describes Enkidu, he turns to the Trapper and tells us of his reaction to guide us in our own perception of this new character: "The trapper's shock reflects the beast's alterity, and we too are encouraged to experience that otherness as shocking."[34] Enkidu could therefore be the ultimate Other, the opposite of Gilgamesh in every way. But at the same time, we are told that the whole purpose of his creation is to be a rival to Gilgamesh, and therefore he needs to match him in some ways: "Let her create the equal of Gilgamesh, one mighty in strength / and let him vie with him, so Uruk may be rested."[35] So Enkidu is in fact created as an *equal* to Gilgamesh. Indeed, when he walks into Uruk, the people marvel at him and describe him as similar to the king: "In build he is the image of Gilgamesh / but shorter in stature, and bigger in bone."[36] He is 'bigger in bone', meaning there is more of an earthly element in him than in Gilgamesh who is 'tall, magnificent and handsome.' Enkidu is an equal, but also an opposite of Gilgamesh. He is, in fact, his Doppelgänger:

> Characteristic of this earliest of epics, incidentally, we meet with the rudiments of all subsequent Doppelgänger narratives, very popular in western culture, in which two dramatized personalities are forged into one, 'two characters (are made) to complement each other both physically and psychologically and who together are projections of the crippled or struggling personalities of a third character with whom the author is primarily concerned'.[37]

The third character in our case would not be another protagonist of the Epic, but one of the identities of Gilgamesh himself, notably that of Man. As Sasson points out, the Doppelgänger became an important figure in later culture, especially in the Romantic tradition; another reason, perhaps, why the discovery of EG in the 19th century created such a stir. Otto Ludwig, defining what he called German *poetische Realismus*, noted that the protagonist and his Doppelgänger were often divided on a moral or spiritual scale: "One character's actions and personality are directed by carnality and egotism, while his or her opposite is driven by exaggerated spiritual ideals. But a closer observation will reveal that these antagonists are but two sides of one coin."[38] The Doppelgänger, as per definition, is a double-edged

[34] Dickson, Keith. 'Looking at the Other in "Gilgamesh"', in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 127 (2007), 2, (171-182) p. 174
[35] EG, Tablet I, dropped stanza
[36] EG Tablet II, verses 184-185
[37] Claire Rosenfeld, qtd. in Sasson 1972, p. 273
[38] Pizer, John. *Ego – Alter Ego: Double and/as Other in the Age of German Poetic Realism*. Chapel Hill, London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998, p. 41. I have researched and written about Doppelgangers in my dissertation production and paper when finishing my MA Text and Performance at the Royal Academy of Dramatic

sword. One of the theorists of the Romantic Doppelgänger, Clément Rosset, believes that the need or desire for Doppelgängers stems from a feeling of uniqueness, at once rewarding and frightening. The realization that I am the only me and that I am unique is rewarding; the fact that when I am gone, there will be no more of me, is frightening. However, the creation of a Double or Doppelgänger in fact doesn't create another me, but another *other* who instead of providing relief endangers the ontological status of the subject, if he or she recognizes "too late in the protecting double the same real which one thought one was protected from."[39]

This is the reason why Enkidu needs to be introduced into Gilgamesh's life. "Seeing the other is transformative; it always brings with it a risk of oneself no longer being the same."[40] Although it seems like the original intention, that of creating someone with equal strength as the king in order to be able to physically challenge him and prevent him from terrorizing his people, has failed since the two become friends, the gods might have been trickier than we would think. The plan in fact does succeed since Gilgamesh stops channeling his abundant and therefore destructive energy at his people and uses Enkidu instead as a catalyst, but the plan also works in a much more subtle way: Enkidu opens Gilgamesh's eyes to the Other which inherently means that he will see himself for the first time, and that sudden new sight will make him change. In fact, after Enkidu's death, the plan works so well that we might suspect it has gone beyond what the gods themselves had predicted – much like what happened in the great flood. The Sumerian and Babylonian gods are far from the perfect all-powerful being of later monotheistic religions; they are a fickle bunch, and much of what they do turns out differently than they'd imagined.

Thus somewhat surprisingly, Enkidu, who comes from the realm of the unconscious, is the one who will pull Gilgamesh up onto a new level of consciousness. In a way, they complement each other. Gilgamesh sees Enkidu (or symbols representing him) in his dreams, in a way helping to create him: "If you are meant, you are seen, and if you are seen you have to see yourself and *have* to become conscious."[41] As the Doppelgängers that they are, they yank each other out of their respective states into new, higher, different ones. Both of them have prophetic dreams while still in their 'static' state, and as Deagon notes, "Nightmare sufferers, when clinically analyzed, tend to show "thin ego boundaries"- a failure to

Art. It is clearly a subject that my own unconscious Doppelganger is constantly feeding me. Here I am paraphrasing a paragraph from that dissertation.

[39] Rosset, Clément. *Le réel et son double*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976, II (1984), p. 125

[40] Dickson 2007, p. 175

[41] Kluger 1991, p. 47

perceive themselves, their desires and inclinations as separate from the being and desires of the rest of the world."[42] Gilgamesh fails to recognize that the rest of the world is different and affected by his actions, while Enkidu in his animal state enjoys a union with the natural world where individuality is completely absent. Meeting each other creates stronger ego boundaries for both of them, and brings them joy and sorrow. As Doubles they belong to the same coin and feel as close friends to each other, but at the same time, "Seeing the other evokes awareness of oneself, and especially of oneself as isolated, finite, and impermanent. Seeing the other makes one see oneself as mortal.[43] Enkidu, and even more so his death, is what will make Gilgamesh realize his own mortality for the first time. On the other hand, Enkidu's gentrification from instinctual animal to more rational man will make him realize the same thing, leading to his curse before death. Together, they form a tangle of identities from animal to man and god: "Here, therefore, we have a parallel case of animal-man and man-god existing side by side; moreover, the man-god is an animal, and the circle is nearly complete."[44] Gilgamesh's mother Ninsun seals their bond by adopting Enkidu before they set out to fight Humbaba: "O mighty Enkidu, you are not sprung from my womb / but henceforth your brood will belong with the votaries of Gilgamesh / the priestesses, the hierodules and the women of the temple."[45]

After becoming friends, the two heroes set out to find and kill Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar forest. The meaning of the forest is manifold; cedars were a precious wood that was highly valued in a region without trees, at the same time the Cedar forest was one of those mythical places which are hard to find and where gods lived. It is a place of the unconscious, of nature and its beasts, belonging to older cycles of mother goddess-type cults. We will have a closer look at the Humbaba episode later when we analyze the great changes and shifts the Epic covers. For now, let's jump ahead to the result of killing the monster: the offer of marriage from the goddess Ishtar, since this is the moment when Gilgamesh faces the first real challenge to his identity. Ishtar (Sumerian: Innana) is the goddess of love and war, the equivalent of Aphrodite but often with a much more dangerous side. Tablet VI, where her proposal is located, was supposedly added to the Standard Version and not present in the Old Babylonian version, which has sparked interest of scholars. Tzvi Abusch has proposed an exciting theory which is quite successful at explaining the episode. In order to review it, it is useful to know that Gilgamesh as a figure

[42] Deagon 1998 p. 475
[43] Dickson 2007, pp. 175-176
[44] Wolff, Hope Nash. 'Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Heroic Life', in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 89 (1969), 2, (392-398), p. 394
[45] EG Tablet III, verses 121-123

remained in Babylonian culture not only as the character of the Epic, but also as an actual deified hero with his place in the myths: after his own death (not described in EG) he was given special status in the Netherworld where he judges the souls of the dead. In a way, he has been granted his wish of becoming immortal, but in a Solomonic kind of way, since he is immortal in death, rather than in life, and still separated from the gods.

Abusch notes that there is something strange about Gilgamesh's refusal of Ishtar's offer. "The Gilgamesh that we have met thus far in the epic is surely not the kind of man to fear a challenge or to imagine himself vulnerable to that which might harm a lesser being"[46] He should be tempted by the exquisite and elite nature of the offer, says Abusch: status, power, wealth and the goddess herself! And yet, for the first time in the Epic, he takes a long moment to refuse, naming all former Ishtar's lovers that she's ruined in one way or another, and insulting her at that. What is it that has turned him away? Firstly and quite clearly, this is the peak moment of Gilgamesh the hero and warrior. Although he has met his Other, he has not yet experienced the self-awareness that the gaze of the Other brings; for now, the two sides of the coin are working perfectly together and seemingly successfully spiting the gods. They have killed the greatest monster in the land, Humbaba, and with that they have achieved *the* deed of their time. Cocky is an understating adjective in this moment when Gilgamesh the strongest and most self-sufficient he ever has: "The gods are unwanted; only Shamash (as Enlil in jealous contempt remarks), like 'one of the boys,' shares in the heroes' exploits."[47] However, arrogance is not the only reason he refuses the goddess. When she speaks to him, she says: "Come, Gilgamesh, be my bridegroom! / Grant me your fruits, O grant me! / Be you my husband and I your wife!"[48] Abusch notes that this is a version of the marriage formula in Babylonian culture where the bridegroom would say, 'You are my wife', and the bride would say, 'You are my husband': "The marriage formula was mutual; the divorce formula, on the other hand, was unilateral – for example, 'You are not my wife, I am not your husband.'"[49] The secret therefore lies in the *way* she offers marriage – with a unilateral formulation which means quite the opposite than the mutual one. In fact, Abusch is proposing that hidden underneath the seemingly enticing words of the goddess is an offer to be introduced to the Netherworld[50] in a 'fast-track' kind of

[46] Abusch 1986, p. 147
[47] Wolff 1969, p. 397
[48] EG Tablet VI, verses 7-9
[49] Abusch 1986, p. 148
[50] Abusch has found other examples from Babylonian mythology: a similar phrase is spoken by the queen of the Netherworld Ereshkigal to her future spouse Nergal, and by the demon Arad-Lili to a human female. In all

way. The elements of the offer include princes and kings kissing his feet, and his chariot being driven by divine creatures. What is hidden behind these images is the land of the dead: it is the dead kings and princes that he would rule over, and the creatures of the Netherworld that would serve him. What she wants is not a simple marriage, but for him to join her in the world of the dead and assume his place as a judging official there. He has the opportunity, the first so far, to choose one of his identities – his divine side – and divorce all the rest of them. But he is at the point where he feels stronger than the gods so the refusal comes easy to him, and in this light makes much more sense.

The choice has a dire consequence: by killing Humbaba, refusing Ishtar and slaughtering the Bull of Heaven (the Big Dipper personified), the two heroes have transgressed against the gods and the punishment, somewhat alleviated by the efforts of their protectors Anu and Shamash, is the death of Enkidu. This is the real turning point of the Epic and a moment where a choice is thrust upon Gilgamesh: in his mythological warrior identity he feels a very human chill inside him: for the first time in his life, he feels fear and becomes aware of death. The gods add another twist to their stratagem; the introduction of Enkidu, the Other through which Gilgamesh gets to know himself is now complete, and the result is the fall from demigod to man. It happens through the duration of Tablet VIII which represents Gilgamesh's 'public mourning'. His real thoughts become known to us at the beginning of Tablet IX: "I'm afraid of death so I wander the wild."[51] He has declined the offer to be a god (or the closest to that status anyway), and now he cannot accept the decision to be a man. So he responds by running away, with the intention to find Uta-napishti and seeking his own version of divinity – immortality. "With the death of Enkidu, he becomes a human again, but Enkidu's death also renders his human life intolerable. He strips himself of his human form and tries to take on the appearance of a god."[52] The real journey of Gilgamesh starts here, in the second half of the Epic. It is too soon for him to just accept reality, he still needs to go on a journey of self-discovery and pushing his own limits in order to get to the point where he will be able to face Uta-napishti and the ultimate truth. "Without Enkidu's death, there is no development. But without the wandering, there would be no possibility for development, and Enkidu's death would have left Gilgamesh, literally, at a dead end."[53]

---

occasions, it is an invitation to die a divine death, meaning descend into the Netherworld forever as a partner of a divinity.

[51] EG Tablet IX, verses 5-7

[52] Abusch 1986, p. 181

[53] Abusch 2001, p. 616

The major consequence of Enkidu's death is that Gilgamesh, whom we know as "The one who has seen the Deep"[54], now becomes "the One Who is Seen"[55] – by Siduri, by Urshanabi, and by Uta-napishti; all of them start their conversations by telling him how terrible and haggard he looks: "Why are your cheeks so hollow, your face so sunken / your mood so wretched, your visage so wasted?"[56] A deep fall for the king who was hailed for being handsome and well built. In fact, he has now become the Other and has switched sides. *He* is now the alienating element, feared by some (Siduri), degraded by others (Urshanabi), and chastised by the wise (Uta-napishti). And his "insistent denials of what he is told about himself, about his fate and his choices, by all he meets, only serve to exacerbate the tension between his understanding and the audience's knowledge."[57] The dramatic irony becomes so acute it is hard for us readers or audience members to still care for him. As with most of his aspects, he is in excess also in the confrontation with death: "Death fills the entire field of his sight, afflicting him with a kind of existential blindness, just as it fills his heart with the inconsolable grief that /…/ makes him deaf to Siduri's measured counsel."[58] In reality, if he had accepted Siduri's counsel of enjoying a simple life, it would have been a regression at that moment in his life, because he would inevitably go back to his own definition of a pleasurable life. In order to eventually achieve what she really means, he needs to go further and find real acceptance, because his own definition of immortality is wrong: "If one just hangs on to life, and immortality means only not dying, then the *secundus homo* is not yet born."[59] Kluger is alluding to the Jungian division of *primus homo*, the earthly man, and *secundus homo* or the heavenly man; the second can only be reached by the complete acceptance of the first. In other words, "if one does not accept death, one gets death."[60]

He does finally get there through two moments of acceptance: the first, when he fails the test of Uta-napishti and realizes that even Death's little brother Sleep is too challenging an adversary for him, and the second, when the snake steals the rejuvenation plant and he loses even the last little hope of cheating time in any kind of way. In both occasions, he is still despairing ("and wherever I turn, there too will be Death"[61]; "For whom, Urshanabi, toiled my arms so hard / for whom ran dry the blood of my

[54] EG Tablet I, verse 1
[55] Dickson 2007, p. 177
[56] EG Tablet X, verses 113-114
[57] Vulpe 1994, p. 282
[58] Dickson 2007, p. 179
[59] Kluger 1991, p. 155
[60] Kluger 1991, p. 160, quoting Jung
[61] EG Tablet XI, verse 246

heart?"[62]) and the first positive statement he makes is at the very end of EG, which closes abruptly, in two stanzas, with Gilgamesh showing Urshanabi the wall of Uruk. Even in the very last moment, he still doesn't say it explicitly, but we can understand that he has now finally accepted his identity as human and all that comes with it, from toil to misfortune to death, and the efforts to find something humanly accessible that will guarantee *a* sort of immortality, even if it's not the kind he had been looking for. His story is that of a fall from god to human.

Shift and Growth

The fall from god to human brings us to the second big thematic area that the Epic deals with and that the creation of the musical was inspired by: Shift and Growth. The basic premise is that EG is in fact a text about transition: transition of human society from a shamanistic, mythological culture of a world organized by gods into a human-based society with new values centering from its own ratio rather than solely divine injunctions; a transition from the collective unconscious to the individual ego through the process of individuation; and a transition of an old world, organized by the cyclical time and earthy nature of mother goddess cults into a linear-time dominated, patriarchal hierarchy led by male gods of light and reason.

Some argue that a change in society was the very reason why epics[63] were written in the first place: "But the grand epics like Gilgamesh or the Iliad, whether oral or written, introduce a note of tragedy; For /…/ they reflect upon the poor fit between the values of power and war and those of the present moment"[64] Abusch suggests that the development of the epic itself from the Old Babylonian to the Standard Version and finally the addition of Tablet XII is a revealing journey. In the (supposedly oral) Old Babylonian, the focus is on the acceptance of a simple familial life and Siduri is the closing character of the story; in the Standard Version, the emphasis shifts to wisdom and securing a cultural future for a community, with the introduction of Uta-napishti as the closing character; and in the twelve-tablet version, Gilgamesh is finally ready to transcend his human life and become a god (albeit of the Netherworld)[65]. Similarly, Vulpe posits that the Descent into the Netherworld in Tablet XII is a way of reconciling the chasm of dramatic irony that has been deepening through the eleven preceding tablets:

[62] EG Tablet XI, verses 311-312
[63] The term is of course anachronistic: not until the Greeks would EG have been called an epic, and by then it had already mysteriously disappeared from the radar of the civilizations in the region.
[64] Abusch 2001, p. 615
[65] Abusch 2001, p. 622

> A more complete view of the Gilgamesh Epic includes this argument: along with death, such everyday things are all we have, and they are what bind us together as human beings. Evaluated in the context of this argument and in view of the poem's teleological construction: the genesis of Gilgamesh from consciousless god to man, and the architectural movement from irony to epiphany and synthesis, the final Descent into the Netherworld becomes not an awkward and embarrassing appendage to an otherwise flawless narrative, but a necessary and elegant conclusion.[66]

That being said, this might be the same reason why other scholars deny the twelve-tablet version as progression, since it could be interpreted as falling back into the chthonic world of older shamanic structures.

What is common to both interpretations is the shift that happens through EG. Gilgamesh learning to become just a man is a symbol of human society as a whole learning to become human, as in conscious of its own humanity. The adventures our hero goes through can be seen having one central idea as a through line: "to emphasize again and again the essentially human nature of the hero in contrast with supernatural types of the past."[67] Indeed, Gresseth finds EG "the first statement, at least in germinal form, of the idea of humanism, a belief we ordinarily associate with the rise of Greek culture."[68] Seen through this point of view, the fact that Gilgamesh as the historic king is last on the royal lists to still seemingly belong to an older, mythological world, makes much more sense. To put it in more dramatic terms, while reading and researching EG we are in the presence of the exact point in time when Myth ended and History began. Gilgamesh breaks through the mythic cycles and becomes the first to step into a new world, no longer belonging to the gods, but to people. Myths, says Kluger, can "be considered as *milestones in the development of human consciousness*", and the hero as the "anticipation of a development of ego-consciousness ", an "an indication of the process of moving toward the wholeness which is implicit and innate in the psyche; the individual, the individuation process."[69] Gilgamesh is the first individual in human history to step out of the collective and say, 'I am'. In this light, the challenge that he undertakes can be revealed for its monumentality. It is easy to look back on EG today and scoff at its seeming simplicity, as nothing else but a 'Bildungs-epos', one of the thousands of stories where young men need to grow up and accept some basic truths about the worlds, which are accepted by everyone else. In a way, that's what the Epic is – but its hero is the *first* who did that, and therefore a

[66] Vulpe 1994, p. 283
[67] Gresseth, Gerald K. 'The Gilgamesh Epic and Homer', in *The Classical Journal* 70 (1975), 4, (1-18), p. 12
[68] Gresseth 1975, p. 13
[69] Kluger 1991, p. 17

symbol not only of the maturation and initiation process of individuals, but of the birth of all humanity. The fall from god to man is the birth of conscience and Gilgamesh a cross between a Luciferian and a Promethean type of character – but older than both of them:

> All of this comes together and 'gels' for the first time primarily as a result of cultural factors: the collapse of older mythic formulations and the consequent rise of a certain disillusionment, perhaps bitterness even, in this realization; but also the consequent birth, almost unconsciously perhaps, of the idea that humans are separate by and for themselves.[70]

No regime has ever gone down without a fight, and the same can be said of the old chthonic world in EG. Its leader is the mother goddess, here incarnated in the form of Ishtar and her earthly natural monsters: Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Its opponent is Gilgamesh as the first consciousness to become aware of itself and develop an ego, and his protector, the Sun god Shamash, a precursor of the monotheistic all powerful patriarchal God. In more psycho-analytic terms, this is the first freeing from the Mother. The war begins stealthily, with the introduction of Enkidu as a secret weapon against Gilgamesh. The stratagem seemingly fails, and evolves into a proxy war between the two heroes and the monster Humbaba, a representative of the old regime. When the monster is defeated, he bargains for his life through material values, offering timber, and in some versions gold. It's also a clash between a material culture and a culture of pride, and as Kluger points out, "*material* comes from *mater.*"[71] On their way to Humbaba, Gilgamesh has several dreams that Enkidu interprets. The interpretations are all tuned towards the success of Gilgamesh in the fight with the monster, but looking past that, we see that the dreams are mostly about disasters, cataclysmic events, mountains falling and storms going on. Besides being positive prophecies for Gilgamesh (and negative for Enkidu since he is not featured in the ones that he interprets as success), they are also foretelling the shift that is about to happen: an old world dying, and a new world arising.

It is fitting that Gilgamesh, the poster child of the new era of humanism should go and seek out Uta-napishti, another man who started a new era. There is a difference though: Uta-napishti was chosen by the gods to be the only survivor of the flood, and immortality simply happened to him, while Gilgamesh is the rebel who started the revolution by himself. In both cases, however, the involvement of the gods is somewhat erratic. When Gilgamesh finds Uta-napishti, the old man says to him: "Let me disclose, O

[70] Gresseth 1975, p. 18
[71] Kluger 1991 p. 179

Gilgamesh, a matter most secret / to you I will tell a mystery of the gods."[72] What is this secret? In assuming that it is the story of the flood we are right, but the secret is a particular *aspect* of the story, namely that of the gods' actions. After causing the catastrophe, the gods themselves get scared and 'curl up like dogs', waiting for the destruction to stop. And while some of them are causing all this damage, others are saving Uta-napishti and the little there is left of mankind. After the world calms down again, they gather 'like flies' at Uta-napishti's sacrifice. Without men, gods are left starving and poor, except that they are not aware of this, or at least hide it from humans. "Thus the secret of the gods is man's rescue from the danger of themselves. Man had to be saved from the gods!"[73] That is what Uta-napishti has realized and what he is passing on to Gilgamesh; appropriate information for the start of the era of humanism. Uta-napishti himself has been in a way neutralized by having been given immortality and put to live somewhere at the end of the world in solitude, but his descendent Gilgamesh, the only one ever to have made it all the way to him, will make use of this realization.

Gilgamesh therefore makes it from god to warrior to man, and as Wolff notes, each shift is marked by a seven day period of transition, birth and death: the seven days of Enkidu lying with Shamhat mark the death of an Enkidu from the unconscious and birth him into the world of man, successfully channeling Gilgamesh's divine energy into heroic exploits; it takes seven days of mourning after Enkidu's death (which itself takes twelve days) for Gilgamesh to finally realize that he is a man too; but after trying to escape that knowledge, it takes another seven days of Gilgamesh's 'mock death', his slumber at Uta-napishti's, to make him accept it. In short, "These three divisions by time separate innocence from knowledge, and knowledge from acceptance, in the life of Gilgamesh, the hero whose adversary is evil in general, and in particular, death."[74] On an individual scale, this is the pattern of human life: "In his youth, he is socialized and becomes a functioning member of society; in middle age, he takes on positions of leadership; and finally, in old age, he accepts death."[75] On a larger one, it marks the development of human consciousness, moving away from the collective unconscious into a historic individuation, and focusing on man, "a being greater even than his gods, a being only too conscious of the limits of his powers, but also a being able to transcend his own, immediate interests."[76]

[72] EG Tablet XI, verses 9-10
[73] Kluger 1991, p. 198
[74] Wolff 1969, p. 398
[75] Abusch 2001, p. 622
[76] Vulpe 1994, p. 278

The story of Gilgamesh is therefore one of the basic narrative patterns of humanity, and despite its late (re)arrival into Western consciousness, the oldest of such stories. Not counting Tablet XII it ends very abruptly, not in a very satisfying way for a modern reader. It is hard to say what the historic reasons for this quick cut-off are, but within interpretive limits we could say it marks a new beginning: Gilgamesh is the first human consciousness that becomes aware of itself and accepts its own condition, and that is as far as it gets. The breakthrough is huge, but only the start of a history of thought spanning several millennia; a history of religion progressing from the squabbling pantheon of a group of gods into a unified God that is the beginning and end, and further into a world without any god; a history of human consciousness dipping in and out of the unconscious, alternately focusing on itself or its surroundings; a history of small and large narratives being challenged and overthrown; a history which will eventually claim its own end and then wonder at the fact that it's still going on, in a self-imposed post- post- post- atmosphere. And despite the break from mythological time into a seemingly linear progression, the cyclical aspect of the world and therefore its inhabitants never quite goes away, it is as much a part of humanity as the other end of the coin. Which means that the Epic of Gilgamesh keeps returning to us in key moments of Change and Shift as the original pattern that continues to be relevant. It feels like we are in one of those moments now and that we need to learn a lesson that we have stubbornly ignored for far too long; whether that be a realization about climate change, an overall re-haul of our values, a break away from meta-cynicism back into basic narrative, a hard look at the way we govern ourselves and the world, we are the childlike semi-divine heroes of our society, and at some point we will have to grow up.

The inspiration of Gilgamesh

What we covered here are just some of the main themes and issues in EG. The text holds many more, and has been an inspiration for artists since its discovery and translation. The translations, retellings, adaptations and 'inspired-bys' range widely in languages, geographical locations, genres, thematic approaches, and correspond to the particular spatial and chronic conditions and environments of their authors or creators.

In the last almost 150 years, there have been numerous retellings of the epic, amongst them: Rudolf Pannwitz's *Das namenlose Werk* from 1920; Józef Wittlin's *Gilgamesz: powieść starobabilońska* in 1922; Frank Laurence Lucas' *Gilgamesh: The King of Erech* from 1948; Anita Feagles' *He Who Saw Everything* from 1966; Tilo Prückner's and Roland Teubner's *Gilgamesch and Enkidu* from 1981; Anne-Marie

Beeckman's *Gilgameš* from 2008, and many more. Authors wrote historical novels about Gilgamesh, such as Robeer Silverberg's *Gilgamesh the King* from 1984; Thomas Mielke's *Gilgamesch. König von Uruk* from 1988; Jose Ortega's *Gilgamesh y la muerte* from 1990; Jacques Cassabois' *Le roman de Gilgamesh* from 1998; Paola Capriola's *Qualcosa nella notte* from 2003; and others.

Carl Sagan's novel *Contact* from 1985 mentions Gilgamesh, while Marek Żuławski created a series of graphic novels called *Gilgamesh* in 1987. Jim Starlin wrote a comic book series based on Gilgamesh, and Jo Bannister a murder mystery, both in 1989. Charles Olson wrote several poems inspired by Gilgamesh; Zabelle C. Boyajian wrote the first dramatic version of Gilgamesh in 1924, called *Gilgamesh: A Dream of the Eternal Quest*, followed by a dramatization in 1950 by Fred Poeppig, *Gilgamesh and Eabani*; a radio play in 1954 called *The Quest of Gilgamesh*, by Douglas Geoffrey Bridson; a poetic drama by Michel Garneau in 1974; a dramatic poem entitled *Lebewohl, Gute Reise* by Gertrud Leutenegger in 1980; dramatizations by Ralph Blasting and Mahmood Karimi-Hakak in 1991, and one by Andrew C. Ordover in 1995; and many more, including perhaps the most brilliant dramatization so far, Derrek Hines' *Gilgamesh: The Play* from 2007.

Abed Azrié composed a cantata about EG in 1977; Per Nørgård, Rudolf Brucci and Franco Battiato all created operas called *Gilgamesh*, in 1972, 1985 and 1992, respectively; Raoul Schrott composed an epic oratorium in 2001.

Gilgamesh has featured in the TV series 'Star Trek' (episode 'Darmok' in 1991), 'Highlander' (1992) and 'Xena: Warrior Princess' (1995); there is a Japanese anime about Gilgamesh with 26 episodes, and there have been several video games created after the Epic, the first one most likely in 1984 called *The Tower of Druago*, not to mention a whole slew of adaptations, illustrated books and retellings aimed at children or young audiences, including a children's musical, *Gilgamesch macht Ärger*, by Hans Zimmer and Wolfgang Bartel in 2003[77]. There is a music band in New York city called Gilgamesh, as well as, even though this example falls out of the artistic field, an anti-cancer research society.

I have listed these artists and their works as an illustration of just how widespread the influence of EG has been, and continues to be, in the artistic and scholarly world. Each of them finds its own focus and topic, from the questions of mortality and the human condition, to themes such as friendship, kingship,

[77] I have gathered all these titles with the help of Theodore Ziolokowski's *Gilgamesh Among Us*, a book on the reception of Gilgamesh in the Western world.

coming to terms with one's sexuality, growing up and finding oneself. Gilgamesh has been approached from historicizing, rationalizing, psychoanalytic, queer theory[78], deconstruction, ecological, ritual and political contexts and points of view, to list just a few. The list represents a small portion of the works that have been created with the thought of Gilgamesh.

Finally, I will turn to my own contribution to this list: *Gilgamesh – A Musical Epic*, and the process of its creation. What follows will stray away from an academic form into a more or less structured reflection on the show.

[78] In the 1970s, the Epic became an iconic text for the gay community and there exist numerous adaptations and retellings where Gilgamesh and Enkidu are lovers and the story centers on their relationship.

II. Creation

Before Rehearsals: Creating a New Musical

Finding the Epic

The process of deciding to do a new musical based on the Epic of Gilgamesh for my thesis was a longer one. I had been doing research and thinking of various plays that I found exciting, mostly from the Expressionism era of the 1920s and 1930s. Some of those are still on my list, such as O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, and Rice's *The Adding Machine*. But the more I read them, the more I started to lean towards the idea of doing something new, something that I hadn't done before. A musical was the obvious answer (an opera would have been another) and since American theatre culture is so heavily imbued with musicals, whereas in my own background they are rare beasts and only now starting to gain some traction (and also respect), I decided to try my hand at one. Up until now, the closest I came was a play with songs that I did almost ten years ago when I had founded my little student theatre company in Slovenia. *The Fairy Tale Triptych,* as it was called, was our second show, following a short and cute adaptation of Oscar Wilde's story *The Canterville Ghost*, a roaring success with our families and close friends who came to see it. *The Fairy Tale Triptych* was in many ways a precursor to *Gilgamesh*, or perhaps *Gilgamesh* is a descendant of the *Triptych*. It was much too big for what it was, we had a live band, microphones, a big cast, and at one point in the show a fully-sized winter sleigh on stage. I had adapted three different fairy tales (or just tales) and joined them into one shaky script, and even composed and performed some of the music (to quite disastrous effects). Although I can't say we didn't have a great amount of fun creating it, it sort of fabulously failed as a show. *Gilgamesh – A Musical Epic* felt similar in many ways; an over-ambitious undertaking where I took on too many roles myself, but had a great time doing it.

When I had firmly decided to do a musical, the next phase was to choose one. Suggestions came flying from all sides; it seems like everyone had their favourite piece, or at least something they would have liked to see me direct, or see on stage in general. However, what I really wanted was to find a show that I could 'play around with', by which I mean edit and re-do. The plan was to work on something with Peter Žargi, one of my oldest friends with whom I went to Middle School. He is a fabulous musician and composer, and since I've started to do theatre, we have been working together more or less on a regular basis; in fact, our first collaboration was on *The Fairy Triptych*, and it has only gotten better since, all the way up to Columbia and the shows *The Weird Tree* and *The Blind*. Beside the fact that I know him very

well and enjoy working with him because of his deep knowledge of music and his own personal style, I also wanted my thesis to be in a way his big piece up till date. Even though he is the founder of a successful music band that toured the country, because of his non-mainstream styles he still moves around on certain margins and in circles of people who respect him immensely but cannot necessarily give him work. My thesis musical was supposed to have been somewhat of an exposure piece for him as well. I spoke to him in the summer and he was on board.

However, the more I read, watched and listened to musicals, the less sure I was of what I wanted to do. I knew very little about the form and its history (and even now I feel like I have only touched the surface), and although I found several that I enjoyed receiving, I wasn't sure that I wanted to try and produce them myself. Moreover, the copyright protection felt like a barrier that would have been hard to breach and bring on a new composer. I glanced at some very old titles and summaries of musicals that are outside of copyright law, but those really belonged to a different era and did not feel like trying to adapt them for the present time would have been a pleasant task, or even possible. And thus, I slowly started to play around with the idea of creating something new. There was one voice in my head which was constantly warning against taking on something too big, and I listened to it – to an extent. That extent was the fact that I decided I was definitely not going to try and create a completely new musical from scratch, coming up with a new plot. Therefore the option that was left was to find material which already existed, and only *adapt* it into a musical, giving it a new score. And somehow, somewhere in the back of my mind Gilgamesh sat lurking and waiting for his moment to come out. The thought seemed quite absurd when it first materialized, but after running it by a few people I trust, including the composer, it slowly started to take root and grow. I started re-reading the Epic and material connected to it. Still, I was hesitant until the last moment; mostly because trying to research musicals in Bogota, Colombia, and Vršac, Serbia, where I spent my Summer, was a difficult task, and I constantly thought I'd find something when I got back to NYC. But when that return was delayed by going to Amsterdam to see the show we had worked on in Serbia, *I Am Not Antigone*, open at the Amsterdam Fringe Festival, it felt like months had gone by and I hadn't progressed in my plan of researching hundreds of musicals in order to find one that captivated me in the way I wanted. Meanwhile, Gilgamesh grew and grew in my head and suddenly I realized I had been thinking about him for a good two months, and much more than that (ever since seeing that show in Slovenia, mentioned in the introduction of this essay), I decided it was time to put to use one of the things I had learned at Columbia, and actually go with my instinct.

First hurdles

The decision was finally made, and it was already almost October. As soon as I felt happy and decided, the first major drawback happened: my friend Peter, the composer, pulled out of the project. It was a choice he had to make because of some recent changes in his life and consequently less availability. I understood him completely, yet at the same time I felt very strongly about the project also being his project, not just mine. And in a very pragmatic sense, I knew no composers in NYC, especially not anyone who would be willing to compose a new musical in four months with people they had never met in their life. It felt like the whole project had been killed in its very infancy, as soon as it had shown its tiny head and took its first breath of real air. In hind sight, it was probably a blessing in disguise; not because I wouldn't have wanted to work with Peter, I still do and hope we will be able to do that again very soon, but because after going through the whole process I cannot imagine what it would have been like for two people to create a new musical while being in two different countries very far away from each other. Much later on, we tried that with Ian (the actual composer of the show) when I was visiting Slovenia for winter break, and realized that writing and composing over Skype really wasn't easy. Not to even think about what would have happened once we went into rehearsal.

Peter was therefore out of the game for this one, and I had to sit down and speak to producer Jenny (Ainsworth), the only other person who was working on the show at that moment – we had decided upon working together way back in the Spring of 2014. At this point we have worked together numerous times, mostly with me as director and her as stage manager, and we make a wonderful team. I can safely say that most of the shows I have done during my time at Columbia would not have happened without her. We spoke about Gilgamesh and decided to give it a week's time. If we managed to find a composer who would be at least interested to talk to us about the possibility of doing the show, we would still keep it in mind and try to go on with it. If not, I was going to pick a classic musical and forget about creating new scores and books. Jenny, who had at one point in her life seriously and professionally played the cello, knew a couple of composers in NY, and she was going to reach out to them.

What happened next was clearly a small miracle. Ian Wehrle, the first person she emailed, responded within one hour with a more than enthusiastic email saying he would love to do it. He seemed so excited that I was taken slightly aback, not knowing what to expect. We met over a drink and talked about Gilgamesh, and I listened to some of the recorded music he had on his website. It seemed like we would

get along well, and he was very knowledgeable about ancient texts, especially those touching upon or covering religion. He has an impressive resume as well, having done work for several television channels, running children's music camps and writing musicals. And so, I sat down and wrote a preliminary version of the first three songs, and sent them to him as a final test to see if he saw potential in that kind of writing. He did.

It still fascinates me how both of almost blindly put an immense amount of faith into each other and in an extremely short span of time set on a path that was going to keep us working very closely together for almost six months. Ian was drawn to the idea of a rock opera, as we were thinking about it at the time, and doing something on a slightly larger scale in terms of people, and I was excited I had found someone who saw it not only as a doable challenge, but an enjoyable one as well.

Creating script and music

Finding a way in

We spent the next four months working on the first full draft of the script and score. I had originally planned to work with two Slovenian friends: the composer Peter, and another very good friend of mine, filmmaker, critic, writer and more, Urban Zorko. He was to be the dramaturg of the production as I felt that dramaturgy was something that one could do in an overseas situation. In the end, he became too busy with his own projects, and although he absolutely provided helpful input and a wonderful sounding board for ideas, he was unable to fully commit to the production. When I realized that, I was already perhaps a third through the first draft, and since the collaboration with Ian was going great, I didn't pursue the search for a full-capacity dramaturg; a decision that was probably not the best one. Instead, it was through discussions with Ian (and Jenny as well) that the dramaturgy happened, and he became the de facto dramaturg of the script, although he was never credited for it. Much later, after the staged reading opened my eyes to the holes in the script, I sat down with Cameron Jefts, a Columbia dramaturgy student from my year, and we had a good chat. He was too busy to come on as a dramaturg of the production, but he very graciously helped quite a lot and turned ideas and concepts around with me.

I had never written the book and lyrics to a musical before. I had written poetry, prose and some theatrical text, but nothing like this. In fact, I didn't think of it as actual writing until much later. I was *adapting*, and the way I did it was by looking at three or four different translations of Gilgamesh at the

same time, deciding what to keep, what to change and so on. Eventually the main edition I leaned heavily on became Andrew George's translation with Penguin Books, which I've been using throughout this essay. It was a very thoughtful gift to me from First Year Actor Mike Walsh and has proven invaluable in the process.

I started by laying out a basic scheme. I wanted to include all the main points of EG but I assumed we would not have the time or capacity to cover everything. So very early on I decided to only briefly touch some of the episodes that had more of an 'action-value' than anything else, such as killing the Bull of Heaven, and most of Gilgamesh's wanderings around the world. Partly, that was also because these episodes are either very brief in EG as well (the Bull), or very fragmented (the wandering). Therefore the main events that stayed were the opening, Enkidu's creation and meeting of Gilgamesh, their friendship and the slaying of Humbaba, the death of Enkidu, Gilgamesh at Siduri's tavern, Gilgamesh at Uta-napishti, and his final return.

Looking back, I don't think I had actually decided upon what was going to be the main focus of the show when I was already writing it. I thought about it and in my head it was always about mortality and the fear of death, since that was to me the most obvious and personal point of identification. I did feel that the music would be modern, based on rock music, and that the text and show would be, if not completely contemporary, at least modernized to an extent recognizable to an audience today. The audience itself was to be a part of the world, modern people listening to the tale of Gilgamesh told to them by the oldest person in the room, possibly awaiting his return. The one thing this was not going to be was a period piece (which is exactly what it ended up being). When describing, or pitching it to Ian, I talked about Gilgamesh being a rock god in our time, which was going to be the main analogy. I saw him as someone who wants to do everything he possibly can, and in excess at that. He has the exceptional position that he actually has the possibility to do everything he wants because he is a powerful king, and even more than that, he is two thirds divine. So life to him is a game and he is not only playing it but also feels like he has all the cheats for it. Until, of course, he finds a soulmate and that soulmate dies, which makes him feel fear for the first time in his life. I wanted his journey to be from someone who is bursting with confidence and arrogance, someone who feels so much in control of his own fate that he doesn't even notice there are others in the same space, the same society as himself; to someone who becomes dangerously obsessed with the craving to continue living, to the extent where all there is left for him is a desperate obsession. I wasn't sure yet what the ending was going to be – did I want him to clean up and

elegantly accept his fate? Ian was in favour of him dying, but I thought life with the knowledge of death would be a harsher punishment for someone like Gilgamesh. I left it be until the end, with the thought that the play itself was going to bring me to a conclusion.

It was only later on that I realized that my vision for Gilgamesh was still flawed at the beginning, and that the world I wanted to put him in had not been fully formed yet. In fact, it stayed like that for a while, wearing the patience of the designers, as they tried to help me in my birthing pains. But when I sat down and started adapting, I thought I had a relatively clear and crisp notion of what Gilgamesh was going to be like, at least at the beginning: strong, fast and witty, modern and full of energy. And I was looking for a discrepancy in points of view. The people view him as a tyrant, a bully. And yet when he would first speak or sing, we would realize that he is, more than all that, just a child with no notion of moral values or consequences of his own acts. In fact, his motivation was to be a genuine desire to really get to know the world, to experience everything there is to experience, and to do it all with a passion. Thus, some of the initial verses of the first chorus song went like this:

He has no equal to prevent
This self-glorifying spree
He is Achilles he is the Hulk
He is Hercules with bigger junk
He's Vin Diesel on Red Bull
Unexpendable Van Damme
He's Iron Man without the drugs
He's the Godfather of thugs

All of these lines, except the first two, were eventually cut, because the focus of the musical shifted quite a bit in favour of a costume period piece. I still think (and hope) that the final product was not a period piece since that is not the kind of theatre I'd like to do (perhaps a TV series, but not theatre). However, what happened as I went on with the adaptation was what usually happens to me when reading good literature: I became more and more caught up in it. For good reason: it is, in the end, one of the greatest and seminal texts of the whole history of literature. And before it was mysteriously forgotten for two thousand years, it had *already* had a thousand year long run, something quite unimaginable. Thus, if anything has stood the test of time, it is Gilgamesh, and clearly there are reasons why – it is absolutely fascinating how relevant and fresh it still feels is as soon as the translation is slightly more modern in terms of language. Which is why, the more I followed it, the more I was ensnared by its poetry and the more that was what my 'adaptation' began to be: another, slightly

simplified version of the historic epic. In addition to that, Ian didn't seem very keen on the contemporary references in the first pages of the text – when he came back to me with samples of the first three songs, there were no Vin Diesel's or Godfathers in there. And so the references gradually disappeared from the text, which is why I eventually had to realize that and go back to cut the ones that were still lingering. In the end, almost no anachronistic signifieds remained although the language itself, of course, is, as always in an adaptation, an anachronism.

Before I just let myself be led by the Epic itself (time and time again I am proven how hard it is to edit works of art that have survived the centuries – even when they do not look it, the structure has been tested so many times that what remains is usually a good, a very good final decision), I felt like being more creative. I wondered, what would I do with the fight between Gilgamesh and Enkidu? What if we only heard it from the point of view of the bride whose chambers Gilgamesh was about to enter when Enkidu showed up and blocked his way? And what if she was singing a song, all by herself, getting ready for the inevitable 'right of first night' to come into effect, or in other words, to be raped? So, version 3 of the fight between the two protagonists went like this:

Girl
I have waited for this night
Since I was a little squirt
Dreams of dresses and desserts
Of dancing, tears and kisses
I have hoped and prayed
That bells would ring for me
That rice would fly for me
That guests would smile for me

I have mapped out every detail
Rehearsed it in my mind
How he'd walk in through that door
He would look around with wonder
As if every time he'd find
That he adores me even more
He would hold me lay me down
He would speak and touch
Whisper kiss my earlobe
He would caress my gown
And then …

I have lived through this night
And waited till the hint of light
There were dresses and desserts
And dancing, tears and kisses
And bells were ringing clear
Good hopes and prayers
And rice for the newlyweds
The guests have gone to their beds

He will walk in through that door
He will look around in wonder
He enjoys this more and more
He will hold me lay me down
He will speak and touch
Whisper kiss my earlobe
He will caress my gown
And then …

There were three other versions beside this one that were eventually discarded, one of them an adaptation of Heinrich Heine's poem *Doppelgänger*, a beautiful piece of text put to music and song by Schubert.

I'm adding these examples to show how widely the script still fluctuated in the beginning, and continued to do so for a while. Even though the focus of the show felt relatively simple and clear in my mind when just thinking about the concept, the dramatization of the material demanded a much higher rigour, something I only fully realized at the staged reading, which was in a way my own 'death of Enkidu' moment.

Working with a composer

It was fascinating to work with Ian. Especially at the beginning I often felt very small in the room compared to him. He has much more experience with musicals, and is clearly an incredibly skilled and talented musician and composer able to voice very articulated and well-argued opinions. Luckily, he is also a very generous and kind person and in many ways he held my hand through this process, or at least at the start of it. He would challenge me continuously since in order for him to go forward with the composition, he needed images in his head and a clear understanding of what it was we were trying to say. And it turned out quite a few times, that what in my head had been quite clear was not at all so in even a just slightly more open space, between myself and an-other. The challenges forced me to think

and justify, and clean up messy and vague parts. And even so, the staged reading left many people confused about the narrative and the drive of the piece (more on that in a moment). In any case, it was a wonderful experience just to watch Ian create. He would ask a question and I would do my best to explain with valid arguments, whereupon he would look up into his mind and just run his fingers over the keyboards, tuning himself until he found the right note, after which melody just flew out of him. He would record himself and then later work on what the original inspiration had been, refining it and structuring it. I didn't much dabble in the music. Naturally, we discussed it at length and I voiced opinions on what the individual pieces felt like to me, which led to changes and tweaks, but the actual structure of it was up to him, and in fact it wasn't until I heard him explain how he had composed it in more scholarly terms to a couple of retirees who came to visit one of our rehearsals, did I realize that there were many more layers to it than I had thought or perceived.

Several larger issues showed up very soon after creating was under way. One, which lingered longer than it should, was the fact that it took me a very long time to actually switch the composers in my mind. I had been so fixed on the idea that Peter was going to compose this musical, that in my head it still sounded like one of his works. He has a very particular style, a softer alternative rock far from mainstream, and he likes to explore noises and play with electronica. And, since this was going to be our project, that was what it sounded like to me. Ian's style is very different; he was mainly drawn to the show because of the billing of 'rock opera', and the addition of an ancient text to it. He based it upon the classic rock of the 70s and 80s and was against any electronica (we did have some keys in there at the end, but very minimal). Neither of the options in inherently better or worse; in fact, they are both terrific composers, but the problem was that the switch took a very long time to happen in myself. As I was listening to Ian play the piano I instinctually realized that the sound was quite different (and I liked it), but the general understanding was that once the music was to be performed by a band rather than a solo piano, it was going to sound very different.

Parts of our discussions with Ian were about the type of sound we wanted. It was a valuable learning experience for myself since I feel like my music vocabulary is rather poor. So we started by me giving Ian titles of musicals, songs and bands that I liked. *Jesus Christ, Superstar* was in there, as well as *We Will Rock You*, and then more contemporary bands like Ratatat and Chinaman. I also sent him samples of Peter's music, just to show him where I was coming from mentally. He would respond by his own samples and inspirations, like The Who and other more classical rock musicians. I stressed that I didn't

want the show to be a 'clear and clean commercial musical' and that I wanted to explore a bit, and experiment, making the sound dirtier and grittier than one would generally expect. I wanted there to be fear in the music, and discomfort (a word we only arrived at later, after the staged reading), and I was not against electronic additions. And so, the collaborative process was for me also a process of accepting the taste and style of my partner. He was very supportive and open in the process, but fought for his inspirations and challenged me to fight for mine. And finally I realized that some of the styles and ideas I had in my head were just not his cup of tea because they came from somewhere else, and that it was pointless to try and coerce him into doing something he wouldn't have enjoyed or even wanted to do. That was an important moment of transition because instead of worrying about the sound I could freely worry about other things, like the book and clarity (which actually needed much more work). In reality, it wasn't that difficult since I had enjoyed his music from the start and had thought it very good, I just needed to align my vision with his (and vice versa, of course; he did a lot of compromising and adapting as well) in order to be able to proceed with full speed and create a wholesome show.

Dramaturgy

Another issue that we had to deal with in a dramaturgical way was the episodic nature of the Epic. Nicola Vulpe, whom I've quoted before, somewhat exasperatedly notes that EG has at least six beginnings and six endings.[79] Even though the Babylonian poet/editor created a cohesive Standard Version of the text, it is still by nature a series of loosely connected events. The question was, how to put that into dramatic form, especially one of a musical. I'm not averse to having heterogeneity on stage and having the through line be somewhere else, not necessarily in the plot (a good example of that was *The Weird Tree*), but since we were putting on the whole Epic, plot was a major point of reference and we realized that there had to be more of a psychological causal structure and journey not just for Gilgamesh, but other characters as well. We were trying to put it all together in a way that would be recognizable for a modern spectator and yet stay true to the text and its particularities, especially the repetition of elements, which is what the ancients most likely used to remember it when it was still an oral tradition passed from generation to generation, and to achieve poetic effect.

It is hard to look at Gilgamesh from a point of view that wants to justify every action of every character and define their relationships. In the end, it is still a conglomeration of different poems. When put together, characters appear and disappear without justification, minds change in split seconds for

[79] Vulpe 1994, p. 277

apparently no reason. Gilgamesh is a tyrant but at the same time the hero we think we are supposed to identify with. Women appear briefly with small specific roles such as the carnal introduction to life for Enkidu by Shamhat (we never see her again in the Epic) or the short *carpe diem* attempt by Siduri, and so on. I particularly wanted the two women roles (I had decided to cut the mother very early on, and to equate Siduri with Ishtar, a notion supported by Rivkah Kluger and her psycho-analytic interpretation of EG) to have more substance and more of a journey, which is why I had Shamhat go on the journey to Humbaba with the heroes, and then have her respond to Enkidu's curse when he is dying (in the Epic it's the god Shamash who responds), while Siduri became another attempt from Ishtar to foil her arch-enemy and make him settle for something beneath him, effectively degrading him from his heroic status. Much as with the music, I resisted for a while the urge to make the play 'flow' with continuity, but eventually gave in, especially after Ian explained he needed a more solid structure in order to compose the various strands of music and put them together. Consequently, most of the dramaturgical efforts were spent on making the narrative lines justified and explaining it all sufficiently to the audience so that they could follow the story and make sense of all the foreign Babylonian names they would be hearing. I realized that most people I talked to and most of our audience had heard of Gilgamesh or vaguely remembered learning about it from school, but did not remember the story or any of the names. For us, that meant needing to be very clear about who's who and handing out the plot lines on a nice silver platter. Since the whole Epic was run through in the space of two hours (or 70 minutes at the staged reading), even a silver platter was a challenge for the part of the audience not aware of the plot beforehand. I did include the whole summary on our website and I'm not aware of how many people actually saw or read it – I suspect very few.

In this vein we proceeded along and the script and music slowly grew into a first full draft. I enjoyed writing lyrics, less so actual scenes, which were rare and very short. Since I was always slightly ahead with the writing while we discussed previous parts with Ian in order for him to find the same zip code, the system we developed was one where I would write more lyrics than we needed, then Ian would show me his idea of the melody and song, and he would mix, match and edit the lyrics I gave him in order to fit the music. After that I would come back with my comments and suggestions and we would hammer away at it until we felt it had shape. The one exception to that was the 'tavern song' *You Can't Have That* which we discussed about before it had been written and agreed that it was going to be a cabaret-like song. Ian immediately recorded the melody he felt was right for it and I set words to the song rather than vice versa. It proved to be an easier process; the song was more or less finished at the

start and only received minor edits later on (compared to very heavy edits in some of the others). By the middle of January, the first draft was ready.

Auditions and Staged reading

On diversity

Jenny proposed the idea of a 29-hour reading which would be our first little workshop and test of the piece in front of an audience. It turned out to be an excellent decision and an incredibly valuable experience in terms of the development of the show; I am absolutely certain that we jumped several stages ahead because of the reading and that the final shows were in a much better place for it. We also profited from another week of music rehearsals, meaning that most actors already knew the songs when they came into the actual rehearsal room.

We held auditions in early January, immediately after I had returned from winter break in Slovenia. They went smoothly enough and I walked away with two thoughts. Firstly, I realized how much is expected of an actor in a musical and that it is hard to find actors/singers/dancers who excel in all of these categories, especially for a show that pays little to no money (we did make a point to pay everyone, and although the amounts weren't great, every single person working on the show received some sort of compensation). And secondly, what I expected and wished for was diversity in my cast – in terms of race, gender, age, nationality etc. We opened the casting breakdown to all ethnicities and gave them a wide age range – we were, however, more demanding on the vocal side where we were looking for singers who could do classical as well as contemporary. After a discussion about the characters, Ian gave them examples – for Gilgamesh it said, think Freddie Mercury or Billy Corgan, for Ishtar Celine Dion, Janis Joplin and Maria Callas, for the Narrator and Uta-napishti James Earl Jones or Mephistopheles, and so on. Contrary to what I was expecting, there were very few non-white submissions. It was already hard to find male actors, and exponentially so to find any non-white male actors. The few who submitted didn't show up for the audition. We did have some age variety, although not much, but we ended up only casting one older actor for the role that demanded an older gentleman. Ishtar was another role that could have been slightly older, but Taryn whom we cast blew us away with her voice. All in all, we had a choice of women and were struggling to find enough men. We were, however, convinced we had found a great Gilgamesh when Robert walked into the room. He had the energy and presence of a man in his prime who is confident and quick-witted, and we had no trouble casting him.

The first cast ended up being all-white with the exception of Khadija, playing Shamhat. Although I was very happy with our choices of actors and thought they did a wonderful job for the reading, it did surprise me how little diversity we could achieve, despite the fact that we were actively looking for it – within the limits of talent, of course. In a conversation later on with Viet, an actor who joined us after the reading and is of Vietnamese descent (but from Hawaii), I was sad to hear that if the audition notice says, 'all ethnicities welcome', he thinks twice before going, because ninety percent of the time, they will 'cast the white guy anyway'. I can only imagine how hard it is for African American, Latino, Asian American etc. actors trying to get roles that are not specifically created for their ethnicity.

Staged reading

Eye-opener

Our cast selected, we proceeded with the reading rehearsals, which was an exciting and a bit confusing time for me, since we just focused on the music. Ian who was going to be the musical director and conductor as well as the composer, effectively took over and my presence in the room was more that of the writer, editing a few lyrics here and there. It felt slightly strange to be rehearsing but not really leading the rehearsal. We also didn't have much time to do table work or discuss the characters with the actors; it really was just about learning the songs. This was new to me, the only experience I had had so far was observing *Allegro* at CSC, which did help since I saw how the rehearsals were organized. It was, however, frightening and excited to hear the text become alive and the songs performed. Ian, who had mobilized himself wonderfully and to an astonishing degree (providing the domain for the website, creating the video trailer, printing Gilgamesh cards etc.), provided a space through an acquaintance: Room 53 on 53rd street, a nice new bar that has yet to attract a more permanent clientele. And by an interesting twist of coincidence we had an audience of retirees at the reading: Robert, our Gilgamesh, had randomly bumped into them on a subway and told them about the show. They were part of the Institute for Retired Professionals and were looking for interesting things to do and learn about. They came to the staged reading then later a few of them watched a rehearsal at the Connelly, and the final show. It was lovely to have them.

The reading itself was an important eye opener. It went well although the tempos were incendiary and there were some slips here and there. We had a crowd of about sixty people, mostly friends and family, and the retired professionals. We asked them to fill a feedback form and then tried to find the main points the forms had in common. It was surprising to see the variety of answers and preferences; some

people enjoyed a particular song, others couldn't stand it; some praised a certain character, others weren't sure what the character's purpose was, and so on. However, what came across as the biggest response was the heterogeneity of language register and musical styles. Many were thrown off by the few modern references that still remained in the lyrics (nothing too concrete, things like 'I'm coming at you like a jet') and the colloquialisms that alternated with a more 'epic' kind of language. Similarly, many thought that although the rock'n'roll song *Stone Cold Bitch* was fun, they found it too different to the rest of the music. And after speaking to closer friends and people whose opinion we trusted, I realized that in fact a lot of people had a very hard time following the story. The music was fast and a lot of important information was in the lyrics; there were names and characters introduced briefly and then appeared, to those who missed the introduction, seemingly out of nowhere; many just weren't sure what was going on and because of that checked out in certain moments. There were hardly any stage directions and no staging so many scenes were unexplained. Still, for the most part, despite being confused or lost, almost everyone gave it a positive stamp overall and said they would recommend it further.

I had my own realizations during the reading and spent one or two days after processing what had happened. After discussing it with Jenny and Ian, I realized that the main thing that needed to be fixed and specified was in fact the *world* of the play. All the misunderstandings or confusions actually stemmed from the fact that the question what kind of world this is happening in, or *why Gilgamesh today*, had not been answered to an adequate degree. And therefore, instead of feeling the reading as a wholesome narrative, spectators experienced it as loosely related chunks of material that felt like they all existed in their own plays.

Questions and issues

I had constantly seen the personal story of Gilgamesh as the driving narrative of the play, figuring the question of mortality as its main conflict. But at the reading I realized that the first half of the play, and the Epic as well, was almost entirely dedicated to Enkidu. Gilgamesh, the titular character only appeared briefly with his introduction song, and even that one we later placed after Enkidu's arrival to Uruk (which follows the Epic more closely, since Gilgamesh doesn't really speak until Enkidu confronts him). Thus, the audience members were wondering, why are we seeing a play about someone else after being told that it would be about Gilgamesh, and why would we care about Gilgamesh, since he is a presented as a tyrant and an arrogant egoist. That question has been one that I've grappled with throughout the

process. I don't feel like we need to 'care' for a character and like him or her in order to enjoy the play. I do agree that everyone needs an 'in' into the show, but why does there need to be something or someone one is rooting for? Gilgamesh *is* a tyrant, a poor king, at least at the beginning, and the whole show was about his *fall*. Yes, he does ascend as well to a higher level of consciousness, but he does it through trial and error; mostly error, and his fall is his realization. If anyone comes out the 'winner', it's the chorus, the people of Uruk. And Shamhat, who have together created a new kind of (democratic) society.

The need to identify with characters is similar to the craving for a double, a Doppelgänger, and it can have the same dangers attached to it. One of the issues of Gilgamesh is that it is 'just' about death. The problem is so common and waived over (since it's inevitable anyway) that no one feels the stakes are high. One could say to Gilgamesh, 'Just get over it'. And other characters do exactly that, yet for Gilgamesh the stakes *are* high, he is facing the abyss and is terrified. Somehow I don't feel that I succeeded in conveying that in the show in a way where the audience would feel it too. I don't know what the reason for that was, if it was the way it was directed, the acting, the costumes and set, or just the world we created, but it felt like there was a distance between the characters and the audience. Which, in a way, is very true to the Epic. The large scale on which it operates doesn't allow for many intimate, small moments, and perhaps that's why the audience doesn't really get to climb all the way into the protagonists heads. Perhaps.

The realization that only the second act was in any way about mortality while the first one centered on Enkidu and his relationship with Gilgamesh faced me with a challenge of how to unite all that. I debated the issue with some people who saw the reading; Cameron, whom I've already mentioned, and director Kelly Johnston. Both advised to focus more on the relationships between the main characters. I thought about changing the reason for Gilgamesh's quest of finding Uta-napishti from trying to stay alive forever to becoming master of death in a way where the sole focus was on how to bring Enkidu back from the dead – the first altruistic deed of Gilgamesh. It still sounds very seductive, but the shift in focus was so radical with so many repercussions that I eventually decided against it (although the possibility of reviving Enkidu is still mentioned in the script by Gilgamesh on his wanderings). I did follow their advice to an extent, trying to flesh out the Enkidu-Gilgamesh relationship more and play with the triangle of the two of them and Shamhat. We realized that the journey to Humbaba needed also to have some sort of progression, of change in the relationship. It became a series of 'boy meets girl' ideograms which

reminded me of the audition for Columbia; except there were three characters: boy who has already met girl meets other boy; other boy confronts girl; other boy gets boy. And, a little after that, other boy loses boy while girl develops on her own.

Shamhat needed her own story, a journey. I eventually added the scenes of her ascending to rule Uruk; she became the most 'successful' character, the one who breaks free from her bonds and obligations (being priestess for Ishtar) and turns into an independent leader who is ushering in a new era. With his stubbornness, Gilgamesh opens the door and pokes his nose inside, but she is the one who – in our version – is the first to step through that door. Besides Shamhat's scenes, I also added the shepherds and their conversations as a way of transitioning into the birth of Enkidu and providing expositional information. In fact, most of the roles of the chorus as well as their lines, were not direct translations from the Epic, but possible ways in which the people could be seen as reacting to the behaviour and deeds of Gilgamesh.

Although it took more rehearsals to really get there (despite the fact that I had already read it before in research material), the show turned out to be not about the fear of death, but about *the fall from god to man*. In the case of Gilgamesh, that happens in an epic way. But it also happens to every single one of us in our lifetime. EG remains relevant in a very deep, archetypal kind of way, and through all the design and spectacle elements, what I wanted was to create a very simple story that would personally reach out to every single audience member and either remind them of their own fall, or the fall of the society around them, or help prepare them for it. I don't know if I succeeded in that, but I could definitely feel my own fall in it.

Design Process

Through all of this I had been thinking about the design elements. I had asked four wonderful designers to work on the show, and they all said yes. Eva Mlinar, my Slovenian friend whom I've worked with on several shows so far, including *The Weird Tree*, *Od,* and *The Blind*, became the graphic designer. Kimie Nishikawa, who had worked on *The Cherry Orchard* came on board as the set designer. Brynn Almli who I had only briefly worked with in design class on the theoretical production of *Woyzeck*, took care of costumes, and Yuki Nakase whom I had known as a brilliant designer from *Od*, did the lights. These three are all current or former Tisch MFA students.

Graphic design

The graphics were mostly separated from the rest, partly because Eva is in Slovenia, and partly because we needed them much earlier in the process. Eva and I have a good routine set up: I send her some thoughts about the show, how I see it, what the important themes are, some inspiring images and the script, and she comes up with a creative response. It has normally only taken one step since I know her style, like it, trust it, and usually agree with her first instinct. For Gilgamesh, we had more discussions since the first image, his tattooed torso, was in her mind just a teaser to go on the website, the fundraising page and preliminary marketing. She was drawing the full figure for the actual poster. We all immediately loved the torso and when the full Gilgamesh came in, we shied away from it. Seeing his head and face in a way made it less interesting, it gave too much away. We were still going to go with it for the posters and postcards, but we realized that he looked very sad – more the Gilgamesh from act 2 rather than the imposing figure we meet in act 1. After some variations of the poster and mulling over, I suggested putting shades on him, and it worked perfectly. In the end, it didn't matter much since the Columbia production team forgot to order posters and postcards. The only reason we had posters at all was because our base player Enrique had a large unused printing credit at his school and decided to use it for Gilgamesh. But it was a blessing in disguise since it saved us money in the long run, and we still had a large poster of Gilgamesh in his shades in the Broadway Box on Columbia campus, and at the Connelly. It also happened that just as we received the final version with sunglasses from Eva, we had decided to put sunglasses on Gilgamesh in the tavern scene to symbolize him being 'seduced' by Ishtar/Siduri's offers of various pleasures in life, and so the poster made perfect sense. We were also inspired by the tattoos that Eva drew on Gilgamesh and put some tattoos on Matt Dunivan who played him in the show.

Set design

The conversation with Kimie was also very productive. There was a short lull at the beginning since I was focusing on creating the script, but once things started rolling, it went quite fast. After an initial meeting with all the designers I set up a Google Drive folder and uploaded some images that I found inspirational onto it. I'm adding some examples at the end of this essay. Mostly, I had been looking at three different strands of images. The first one was based on pop art, rock art and fan art. This came from the idea that we were operating in a rock star world, possibly at a concert or in a basement listening to grinding guitars. That atmosphere perhaps evaporated a bit through the process (as I discussed above), but the original inspiration was a world of colour, rock kitsch and cartoon/video game/pop art inspired motifs. I wanted that to be the feeling of act I, since we are looking at the world through Gilgamesh's eyes, and

he sees it as a game that he's winning. I wanted that to change into a much darker world of fear and death in act 2; this was the second strain of images consisting of nightmarish images in bleak and black hues. The third one was historic Babylonian/Sumerian art and culture: brick lions and griffins, large bearded men and clay walls of towers. Somehow, I told the designers, I saw all those worlds merging and creating a new one, not necessarily grounded in time and space although our secret story behind it could be a concert at a construction site. Kimie came back to the next meeting with the idea of levels, basically creating a Super Mario type of landscape on stage. It tied in with pixilation, which was developed from the Babylonian brick mosaics images. It immediately felt like the right zip code and it ended up being the first version of what we presented to the Columbia Production and Technical Team. It looked like a video game screen and had light boxes that filled the space, creating a tiled or pixelated lighting effect as well.

Tom Gilmore and Scott Mancha let us know that we would have to scale down a notch or two since our budget was not going to cover what we wanted, especially the light boxes, which we wanted to control remotely and individually. It proved to be a good back-and-forth that eventually led to making the space more functioning, giving the actors more room to act, while the railings that we had to add because of the height of our platforms became, through Kimie's creative re-imagining, a great alternative to the light boxes (the only remains of these were the boxes that the actors used to sit on, two of which also had lights on them). Despite the general progress, there was a moment when neither I nor Kimie were sure if the set still belonged into the same world, or if it was still useful to the ever-changing and developing show. Kimie even made a new model, completely different, which included a large tree. But we decided to trust ourselves and go with it anyway, since it still felt right (the hesitations I had were of a more theoretical conceptual nature).

The rest went relatively smoothly, and the third or fourth edit of the set ended up being the one that finally got built. There were some last-second on-stage changes due to an error in the rendering (we had made the top platform wider but the rendering was not updated, which forced us to move the downstage platforms further downstage), but it was a minor change that perhaps ended up being beneficial rather than detrimental. Instead of taping, we painted the panels on the walls, which saved money. Luckily, a trip to MFTA provided us with lots of free paint, a vital component of the set. The props were discussed at length and tried to be kept at a minimum, deciding mostly about the world in which they fit – either the city world of culture, or the more natural, instinctive one.

Costume design

When I spoke to Brynn about costumes, I showed her all the strands of images already mentioned, and the people that our actors were invited to be inspired by in terms of voice and image. I told her of the big switch from act 1 to act 2 where the colourful world was supposed to fade into black and then settle in a middle kind of 'reality'. I also said I wasn't looking for historical or contemporary authenticity and that we could create our own world. I mentioned the *Hunger Games* franchise as possible inspiration; the society in those films has its own fashion statements, including the sculpting of men's beards, which I was excited about doing. Brynn came back with images and sketches that she put together, but emphasized that they were still coming from different ideas and felt like a least three distinct concepts. She also realized that with the chorus constantly changing characters (and potentially costumes), her work was going to be much more than she anticipated. At one point she calculated we were thinking about more than 75 different looks! Which sparked some worry on her part since she was also in the process of working on her own thesis. She brought on an assistant costume designer, Nina Vartanian, and after a cold email sent to the department in search of projects, Patrick Kyle joined us as a hair designer, a quite exciting and unique opportunity. Eventually the world of the play crystallized itself more and I was able to make stronger decisions about the costumes. I mixed and matched out of the images that she had provided, and eventually we had to scale down and simplify some of the previously anticipated changes; for example, when the chorus turned into animals, we had anticipated a costume change by adding on a couple of pieces. After looking at sunglasses, animal masks and furry hats and not getting very excited by any of those, we finally dropped that and let the chorus work on the animals through physical movement rather than look. Similarly, full black cloaks for the funeral scene became little black accessories such as shawls and scarves, and so on. We experienced with moustache sculpting for Matt by either drawing on him or adding little bits of hair, but eventually realized the best and simplest option was to just keep him natural since he had a wonderful beard of his own. All in all, despite its monumentality and my indecisiveness at the beginning due to the feeling that I hadn't figured out the exact rules of the game yet, the process went quite smoothly, and Brynn did an extraordinary job. Personally, I have a very limited costume imagination and in the smaller scene work or shows I have done at Columbia I usually let the actors pick their own clothes after some general guidance. It feels less important to me in the hierarchy of the elements on stage. But this time, for once, I decided to really think about them and make them count. I'm not sure if the audience read into the

costumes the way I planned, but I do believe that they helped immensely in creating and defining the world we were in and I am satisfied with the amounts of thought and focus that were put into them.

Lighting design

Lights were perhaps the smoothest of the design elements, since by the time we were in tech, Yuki had seen the run-throughs of the show and we had had several meetings to discuss the atmospheres and lighting values of the scenes. Again, I emphasized the world of colour versus the bleaker, darker world, and a third type of space: a more sterile environment (the inspiration was the final few scenes in Odyssey 2001) where Uta-napishti lives among white walls. I was impressed by the sheer quantity of lights she used; Columbia had to buy a couple of lights since she used everything that was available, and still fell short. Walking around the set it felt as though lights were everywhere. She also created an astonishing number of computer renderings showing what the lights would potentially look like. The renderings helped immensely as we sat in a café in Harlem and went through them. I had very little to add to her ideas; she had fully grasped what we were going for and provided some excellent solutions on her part as well. I sent her a short description of the show through a lighting point of view, which went like this:

1. Prologue
   (narrator) Dawn, slow dim light comes up, grows with the intensity of the song – the pledge is at sunrise
   Entrance of Gilgamesh – perhaps we don't really see him, or he is a silhouette as if in the sun, as if he is the sun
2. Shepherds
   We go to a different time (narrator): late evening, night. Gilgamesh stays in some marking light but again, more as a statue or shadow.
   The shepherds: feeling of fireside or lanterns
   Entrance of trapper: possible cue, change to slightly more dramatic
3. Shamhat
   We go deeper into night and forest, with a light on her and on Enkidu in the cave (being born). A mysterious, mystic moment that continues and progresses to her reveal and the sex (narrator)
4. Dream
   Everything goes dark except Gilgamesh, whom we still can't really see – he has come out on the wall to get some fresh air after a strange dream
5. Enkidu and Shamhat
   The general mood continues although it gets brighter and 'realer': Enkidu is awakened from his trance and experiencing strange and frightening change
6. Duet

The transformation is now in more gentle stages: we could be in the forest on a clear day, and she is teaching him how to be cultured. More good natured, sweet, less mystic.

7. Shepherds
   The shepherds are feasting in the meantime – we are transitioning into fun, drinking and dancing. Although first they need to welcome Enkidu
8. Dream
   Similar to first dream, but more disturbing – what is he dreaming about? What is about to happen?
   …

And so on for the rest of the show. As Yuki was building cues in tech I usually only tweaked here and there with some minor suggestions. She would build the cues during breaks and the whole process was smooth and highly professional, which is exactly how Yuki is, besides being a very kind person. I enjoyed the lights very much in the show and thought they supported everything with clarity and precision.

Rehearsals and Performances

Rehearsals

In the two weeks between the staged reading and the start of rehearsals, we had to somewhat reshuffle the cast. Three chorus members realized that they could not commit to the whole process, but most importantly, Robert, our Gilgamesh, had managed to double book himself by accident and had already started rehearsals for another show that had a run which stretched through most of our time. It was quite a blow but, similarly to the composer situation, it got solved by Jenny in a couple of days. Matthew Dunivan, a Columbia graduate, had wanted to audition for Gilgamesh but was unable to come in the end. I already knew he was a wonderful actor, and when he received a thumbs-up from Ian for his voice, he was on board.

The first rehearsal, or rather meeting, made me nervous and excited. It was much easier, however, since most of the cast was still the same and already knew each other as well as the songs. We read the script which had developed in between, then sang through the songs. The rest of the rehearsal process went relatively smoothly. In the first two weeks, I started rehearsals with warm-ups consisting of various exercises of focus, presence and ensemble building. We would always include a freestyle dance with the theme of the scene we were rehearsing, a mixture of a Laban and a Michael Chekhov exercise which the actors enjoyed quite a lot. As we got closer to tech week, time constraints were more strongly felt and I slowly transitioned into rehearsals without official warm-ups. What I did do, was schedule a run of

whatever we had done up to that point, every end of the week. This is something that has stayed with me since talking about Mike Alfreds in Brian's class. I have successfully employed it in productions since then and I still believe it is an incredibly useful tool, especially for getting actors to understand the whole show and the journeys of their characters. We had a run of most of act 1 by the end of the first week, then all of act 1 and the beginning of act 2 by the end of the second week; in the third week we ran all of act 2, and at the end of the fourth week, we did our first run through of the whole show, before going into tech.

We had one day a week dedicated to just music and Ian led those rehearsals. He was also present for all the others, playing the piano. Zhenghao, the stage manager, did a great job of keeping all the schedules in sync and adapting as we went on. I myself had many issues and hesitations. One was getting used to the nature of a musical. Even though I had written it and imagined what it was going to look like to an extent, it was hard to really picture the set and what it would actually feel like in the space. When rehearsing at Columbia, we used some small platforms as stand-ins and we had to set a whole slew of questions aside to when we were in the theatre and could finally answer them. This was new to me, since I have not had such extensive and complicate sets before due to much smaller budgets. Another thing I found mind-boggling was that I was not really going to hear the music until almost the end of the process. Ian was supporting rehearsals in a fantastic way, but the sound is very different when played by one piano or a full band. I had to wait until around week 4 when I could sneak into a band rehearsal and hear snippets of what they were doing. I wasn't worried about not liking the arrangements, but it was harder to have a complete picture of the show in my head without the final sound.

Choreography

Choreography was also a challenge. We had been looking for choreographers but hadn't found any yet when rehearsals started. I went in and created some simple gestures for the opening number, which we actually kept all the way until the first real feedback from Brian ('simplify!'), after which I cut the somewhat awkward choreography I created and relied on Musa and Jarvis, the two choreographers we eventually found and brought on board. Jarvis, a second year acting student at Columbia, was very busy so Musa was delegated as principle choreographer and she did most of the work while he helped out as much as he could (especially with some fabulous warm-up sessions). Speaking to choreographers was also something relatively new for me, and I think the beginning was a bit bumpy, but slowly we were becoming a better team and Musa invested a lot of great energy into the project. I was unsure

sometimes how much I should be participating or interfering during a session of choreography. Once or twice, I gave her a couple of hours and left the room; other times I would try to be present but not interfere, only steer gently. By the end I had gotten better at it although I believe there is still much room for improvement.

Writer vs. director

I also stumbled upon my own text. Although I am interested in writing and have done so before, it has been a while since I have seriously committed myself to writing a complete work of literature and I think the lack of experience and mileage shows. It was fascinating and sometimes quite funny to see how Peter the writer enjoyed the words on the page while Peter the director cringed when he heard them spoken out loud. In the first meeting I told the actors that there were going to be many changes as we go on and the show develops and that they needed to expect it. That was exactly what happened; I edited and re-edited many of the scenes as we went along, bringing in fresh copies to almost every rehearsal (giving grey hairs to Zhenghao). Most of the edits were quite small, but there were some bigger ones, including new scenes. I also encouraged the actors to suggest their own edits if they had ideas and although this never became a prevailing modus operandi, once they realized I really meant it, some of them pitched in and created their own lines here and there. Although I don't think that the script to Gilgamesh is particularly good, what I do see as a very positive thing is that I am not at all precious about my writing. I am always ready to change it, cut it or adapt it, and have few qualms about sacrificing large portions of it. Perhaps that is not the sign of a good writer, but it does help when developing a show.

It is small wonder then, that with the constant developing of the script, learning how to work on choreographies, learning how to rehearse scenes with songs, the monumental design processes and all the marketing/fundraising we were trying to do on the side, I slacked off on the actual directing part of it. Or rather, perhaps my ideas were spent by the time I stepped into the room as a director. The text wasn't helping much since I had written it and knew the depth it went to. I couldn't, as when working on an actual real play, layered with meaning and asking for an interpretation, pick it apart and explore it with the actors. The material, the Epic, was in the background, but the adaptation made it quite straightforward in many ways, and so when I was trying to block the scenes, there were moments when I did not know what to do or say. Perhaps the intention of the scene was not clear enough to Peter the writer and therefore too vague for Peter the director. In the end, it felt quite repetitive (which could

pertain to the Epic, but of course only when it progresses with repetition); although we used the whole set, we only used it in the same manner: to climb up or down on it. There was little time to actually explore the possibilities since what time we had, we spent on just getting used to the new differences in levels, and dealing with the unwieldy wheels on the two moving platforms. Nobody had known what those would be like since we were renting the platforms, and when they finally arrived it turned out they were not as stable as we had hoped, and their braking systems were not easy to operate as well as not very efficient.

So, while the process itself was chugging along and things were slowly falling into place, I felt like I was doing my job only moderately well. At the end of my 2nd year at Columbia I felt very confident, having directed four shows in one year, most of which I thought were on a decent level. During the summer between my second and third year, however, my confidence was shattered while working on my first actual 'professional' project which had an incredibly intense and difficult process. In the end the result was a very good show, but during rehearsals all my self-esteem had disintegrated and I was wondering if I had learned *anything* at all at Columbia. There were moments in Gilgamesh where I felt that way although all in all I had more control and therefore more confidence. There are still times when I feel like I am lacking craft techniques I should be a master of by now (like coming up with verbs for actors, intentions for their choices, figuring out what a scene really is and what its event is, finding meaningful and logical blocking, and making things surprising but inevitable) and that frustrates me. I don't think the making of any show should be easy, but some things should be coming more naturally to me at this point.

I did enjoy working with the cast of Gilgamesh. They were a diverse collection of people with very different processes. Matt and I spent much time discussing the intentions and journey of Gilgamesh. Towards the end he came to me and said, 'I understand the fall to man now: when he says, "I failed", it is a relief, a cleansing.' He was right and the moment was quite beautiful. Ben, who played Enkidu, had a difficult task of portraying no less than four different organic convulsions that happened to him: his birth in the forest, the change to man and finding of language, the fight with Humbaba, and his death. I tried to push him as much as I could to really look for those differences. Carson, our Uta-napishti and Narrator, had many ideas and suggestions of his own and supported the project in every way possible, sometimes with such a zeal that I had to remind him to come to me with notes for others, actors and designers alike. Taryn soared through her scenes and mostly immediately understood what was needed.

Kat, our Shamhat, needed to find the moment when the journey of the sacred prostitute turned priestess turned leader became clear to her. The chorus were trying to tie in all their different characters and making them not just one-sided stereotypes, but little physicals embodiments of each of the worlds they were in. Everyone brought in many fine ideas. I tried to take Brian's main note after a run that he came to, about simplifying and eliminating some of the redundancy. I thought about that note and realized that I had been so worried about giving the chorus something to do in every scene as well as not keeping them in the wings visible to everyone (we had no masking), that it became illustrative on many occasions. I toned it down as much as I could for the shows, but there was definitely a lot of room left for improvement.

Secret story

We did have a secret story which is quite exciting and could be the direction of where to take Gilgamesh if it does receive any further development and an afterlife. The secret story tied in with the original ideas about rock stars and their being the equivalent of a modern-day Gilgamesh. So the hero himself was secretly a rock star à la Freddie Mercury and Enkidu his more grungy friend/lover à la Kurt Cobain. Ishtar was the record production company's manager's daughter who offered record deals to singers who would sleep with her; Shamhat was the hippie friend trying to just make everyone get along, and the chorus were fans or groupies who first had to be won over. Enkidu's death was an overdose of heroin, Gilgamesh's wanderings were the rock star plunging into excess from the shock of his friend's death and ending up in a hospital where Uta-napishti was the doctor. The end of the show was the rock star giving up his detrimental life style and career and becoming a normal civilian. None of this was explicitly shown, but it was in our heads and hopefully some of the feeling of that came out anyway. As mentioned, this could be a road to explore in further stages of development.

Perhaps the only moment where this world came through more was the fight with Humbaba. I had decided in the very beginning that although I was not changing the names of characters and keeping all the mentions of the gods, the divinities themselves would not *actually* be present. A careful spectator and listener would realize that every time the deeds of gods were discussed, the phrase *So it is said* was uttered, delegating it all to the land of myth and story. No *actual* supernatural deeds were shown on stage: Ishtar just spoke about being Ishtar and didn't actually do anything that would corroborate that; Gilgamesh was said to have had a divine side, but his immediate failures showed that his own perception of himself was quite at odds with that of his people; Uta-napishti never *actually* said he was

immortal, he only confirmed that other people thought it, and so on, creating an intentional ambiguity. As we were debating what to do with Humbaba, the original plan was to show that he as well was just a human being in a forest, an Oz-like character whose was only made terrible through legend and marketing. In a way, we played around with some story-creation themes. But later I realized that killing Humbaba was the final breaking with the natural world for Enkidu; Humbaba was his initiation and his final joining the world of Gilgamesh (shown on stage by various costume changes). Therefore Humbaba became an internal fight for Enkidu, a part of himself that he had to destroy. The whole episode was a sort of 'trip', induced by a box-shaped pill given to him by Gilgamesh. Everything that happened in the scene was coming from the point of view of the hallucination of Enkidu; the demons he saw around himself, the intense stimulation of senses, a poetic hallucination inspired by Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, and finally, a return to the cave of his birth where he had to battle with himself and be reborn as a complete human (which he regrets soon after, when he realizes that he is about to die a very human death).

Performances

Some success stories

The one thing I am quite proud of is being able to create a relaxed room where people feel safe to really plunge into the work and experiment while having fun at the same time. I do think that every single person working on Gilgamesh was present with mind and heart and genuinely cared about the project. However, if I am brutally honest with myself, some of the confidence boosts I give to actors and others might come from the fact that I am quick to agree with their ideas. I would never say to an actor, 'this is terrible'; that is not in my character nor is it constructive. But I also feel like I lack the ability to be really honest with people if needed. If I see something I think should be done differently, I try to steer them into that direction, but I will rarely just face them with my thoughts or push them to an extent of losing a comfortable relationship. In short, I probably spend too much time trying to be liked and making everyone have fun rather than concentrating on the quality of the work and not minding if because of that, actors might be annoyed with me or hold grudges. That is definitely something I need to get over and learn to do if I ever want to make top notch theatre. I hope that the choice is not to either have a room where everyone is bonding and having a great time, or a first-rate performance. I don't believe it is, but I still need to find that place of balance where I can be stern, or an asshole, and yet have the actors eventually understand that the work was that much better for it. It's a character flaw of mine,

and it doesn't help in a complicated process, especially once I start working professionally with people I don't necessarily know.

Still, I am definitely proud of where Gilgamesh ended up. We had practically no major issues that weren't solved quickly (Carson, our Uta-napishti, who was working with people who could almost be his grandchildren, was at some point upset by the amount of flour in the air around him, but we toned it down) and I steered between the different personalities and habits of the actors. Tech was quite smooth and went fine – we didn't achieve the goal of a full run on the last night of tech, but we did run act 1. Ian had meanwhile put together a great set of people for the band, they came into the space during that week and it turned out that the position on stage we gave them (which was a 'compromise' form our original idea of raising them up on the highest level upstage) was actually a very good solution. They did their jobs wonderfully, and the only bigger problem we faced was sound mixing. Devon, our mixer, had extremely little time to figure everything out. He also didn't know the show and so needed time to get used to it and understand it. At the same time, the space is not as acoustic as one would want, the sound changes with the number of people present, the microphones are always a hassle, and so on. It went back and forth: the run of act 1 at the end of tech sounded good; act 2 on dress rehearsal night sounded terrible. The actual dress rehearsal was a little better and opening night's sound was quite good. The second show sounded terrible again while the third and fourth were again much better, leaving the closing show somewhere in between (with an exhausted cast, since it was a two show day). I believe Devin, Ian and the rest of the technical crew did everything they could; the problems we had were just the usual guessing game that happens once you introduce tech elements. I decided I would be satisfied as long as I could hear the lyrics of the songs (which I could not in some of the precious runs). I could, and that had to be enough.

During all this, fundraising and marketing had been going quite well and the shows were sold out. Mostly it was family and friends who came, and of course Columbia people, so the audiences were generally supportive and reacting well. Jenny did a fabulous job of organizing everything including an opening and closing party and Gilgamesh-themed gifts for the whole cast and crew. Having invested her own money into this production, she was an incredible pillar on which most of it stood.

Conclusion

The journey to Gilgamesh was indeed quite an epic one. Only after closing night, and after my parents and friends, who had come into town to see the show, left again, did I realize how much the show had demanded from me.

Family and friends were delighted with it while I had a fun time listening to most of my fellow theatre peers struggling with the formation of their sentences, trying to find something to praise while saying anything they didn't really mean. I didn't mind though. I didn't want to justify or explain the show to my audience unless they specifically asked. The way it was set up, it was supposed to stand as an independent production and it did, to an extent.

I feel like the challenge I gave myself was achieved. I wanted to try to direct a musical, and then decided I also wanted to write it. I wanted to take advantage of the resources and support that Columbia and its machinery could offer me. I expect that I will not have the chance to direct a musical with a cast of thirteen and a six-piece band on stage for quite a while. I wanted to make a show with songs, choreographed numbers and elaborate costumes. And I wanted to be left with something I could potentially keep pursuing if I decided to. All of those things I did, and the show happened. I felt supported by the Columbia production team (except for that little mishap with the posters); the one area that I felt nothing much had been done was marketing. The student coordinators did their jobs and we did ours, there wasn't anything inherently wrong with the process. But from what I hear, there is a list of industry people that Columbia sends invitations to for the theses. I'm aware that these people are most likely inundated with similar invitations and that it's mostly up to the students themselves to reach out to them; something we didn't do very successfully. But the fact that not a single industry person from that list showed up (the couple that did were invited by the actors) is perhaps an issue that should be addressed for future generations. Agents and managers seem to respond to the actors' showcase; there should be a system in place that puts directors in touch with people who might be interested in their work (Visiting Directors is, while very useful, not the same thing).

Thus, I suppose I successfully used the last opportunity from Columbia. Was the show itself good? It was not brilliant, that is for sure. It was in an early stage of development, at times clunky, with much to be left desired, mostly from its dramaturgy and directing, especially in terms of enabling actors to really find their best modes. It was, perhaps, weird, although I support anyone who labels it that way. It was, hopefully, a start. A start of the journey of *Gilgamesh – The Musical Epic* to becoming a wholesome and good musical; and a start of a career that will hopefully find a place to grow somewhere in the labyrinth of the theatrical and performance world. And it happened thanks to a large number of people whose names I will mention one last time:

Jenny Ainsworth, Ian Wehrle, Zhenghao Zhang, Miranda Swineford, Kirk Laing, Kimie Nishikawa, Yuki Nakase, Brynn Almli, Eva Mlinar, Nina Vartanian, Patrick Kyle, Tara Daino, Matthew Dunivan, Ben Mulgrew, Taryn Tonelli, Khadija Sallet, Carson Grant, Jillian Schiralli, Elena Glass, Christopher Morriss, Ambar Aranaga, Justy Kosek, Viet Vo, Mary Linehan, Zach Solomon, Robert Agis, Kathleen Fletcher, John Caliendo, Max Duane; all the Columbia production team (staff and students), the people who helped out with advice and feedback – professors, classmates, friends; and everyone who donated to the campaign.

References

Abusch, Tzvi. 'Ishtar's Proposal and Gilgamesh's Refusal: An Interpretation of "The Gilgamesh Epic", Tablet 6, Lines 1-79', in *History of Religions* 26 (1986), 2, pp. 143-187

Abusch, Tzvi. 'The Development and Meaning of the Epic of Gilgamesh: An Interpretive Essay', in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121 (2001), 4, (614-622), p. 616

Deagon, Andrea. 'The Twelve Double Hours of Night: Insomnia and Transformation in "Gilgamesh", in *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 1 (1998), 3/4, pp. 461-489

Dickson, Keith. 'Looking at the Other in "Gilgamesh"', in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 127 (2007), 2, pp. 171-182

Gresseth, Gerald K. 'The Gilgamesh Epic and Homer', in *The Classical Journal* 70 (1975), 4, pp. 1-18

Kluger, Rivkah Schärf. *Gilgamesh: The Archetypal Significance of A Modern Ancient Hero* (ed. H. Yehezkel Kluger). Einsiedeln: Daimon Verlag, 1991

Pizer, John. *Ego – Alter Ego: Double and/as Other in the Age of German Poetic Realism*. Chapel Hill, London: University of North Carolina Press, 1998

Rosset, Clément. *Le réel et son double*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976, II (1984)

Sasson, Jack M. 'Some Literary Motifs in the Composition of the Gilgamesh Epic', in *Studies in Philology* 69 (1972), 3, pp. 259-279

The Epic of Gilgamesh (translated and introduced by Andrew George). London, New York: Penguin Books, 1999, III (2003)

Vulpe, Nicola. 'Irony and the Unity of the Gilgamesh Epic', in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 53 (1994), 4, pp. 275-283

Wolff, Hope Nash. 'Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Heroic Life', in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 89 (1969), 2, pp. 392-398

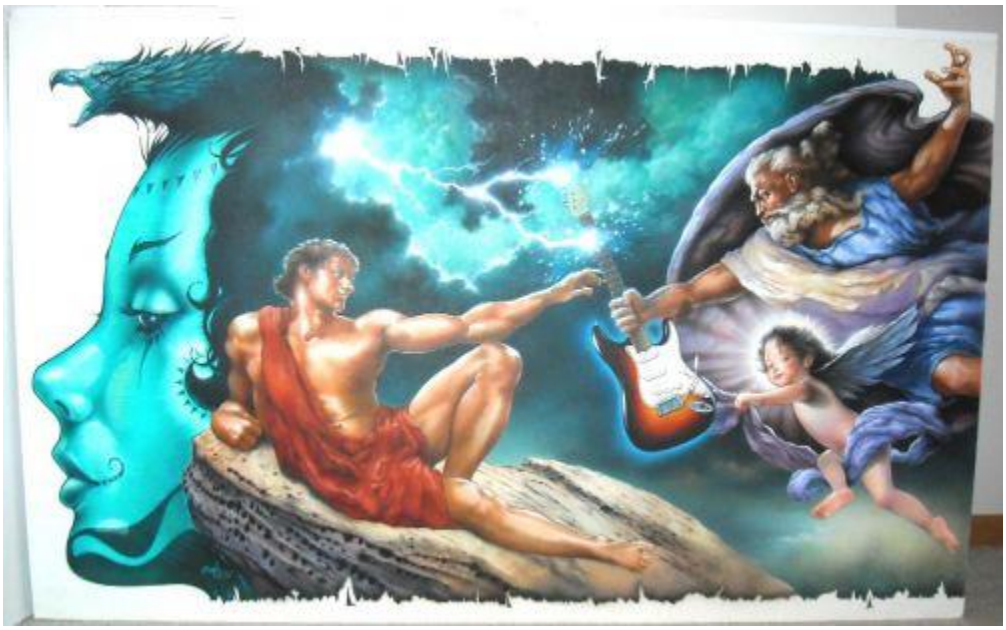
Ziolkowski, Theodore. *Gilgamesh Among Us: Modern Encounters With the Ancient Epic*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2011

Appendix: Imagery

What follows are examples of images from the design and rehearsal processes.

Images of inspiration:

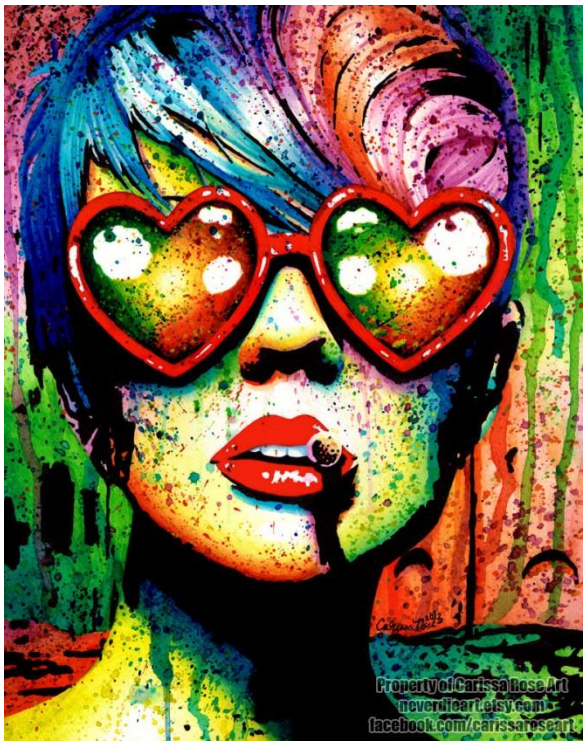
Zdzisław Beksiński: Untitled



Let there be rock and roll

Cai Guo-Qiang: Head On

Takashi Murakami: My Lonesome Cowboy



Unknown Artist: Untitled

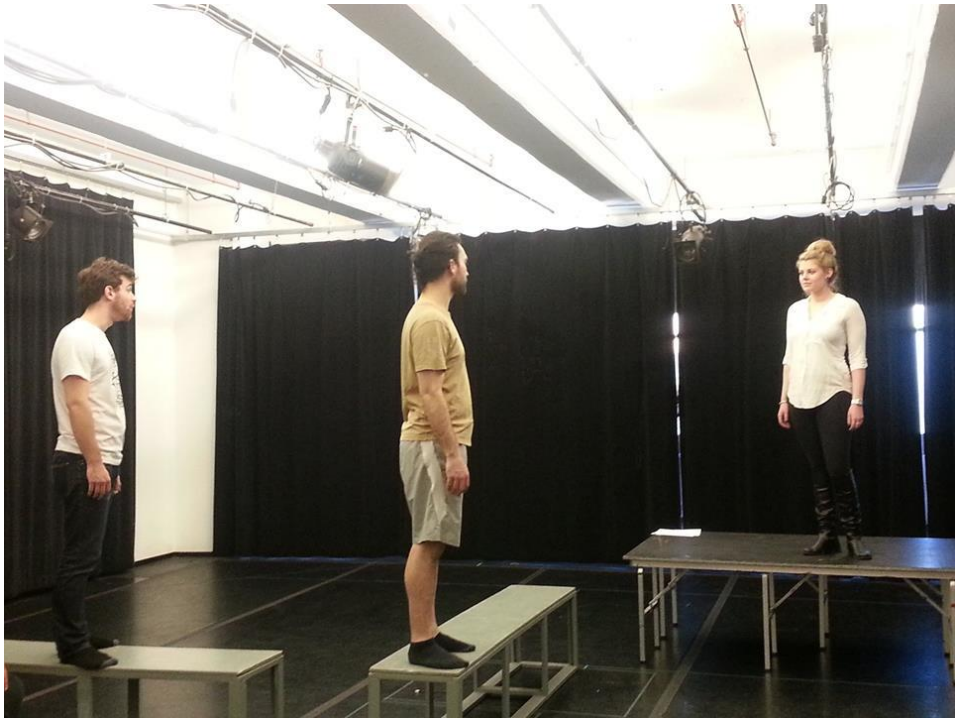
Yayoi Kusama: Oblit Room

Ziggurat of Ur

Samurai Jack

Photos from rehearsals

Ian, Ben and Kat working on the Enkidu/Shamhat scene (photo Jenny Ainsworth)



Ben, Matt and Taryn rehearsing the Ishtar scene (photo Jenny Ainsworth)

The staged reading (photo Jenny Ainsworth)

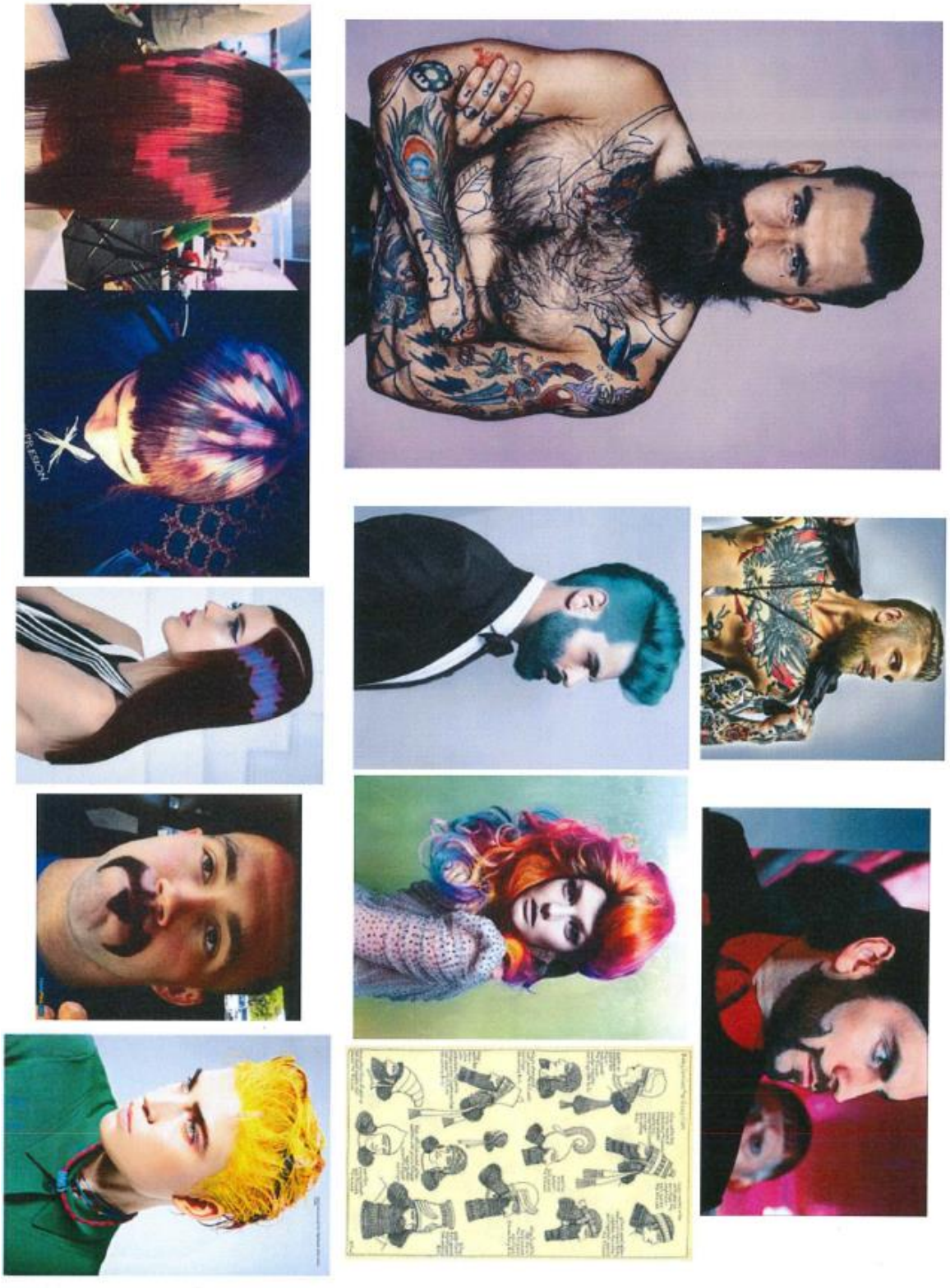
The chorus rehearsing the opening (photo Zheghao Zhang)

Rehearsal in the theatre (photo Matt Dunivan)

Cast selfie (photo Matt Dunivan)

Costume

Research costume board for the chorus, by Brynn Almli



Research costume board for Gilgamesh, by Brynn Almli

Set design

First model of set (model and photo: Kimie Nishikawa)

Almost final model of set (model and photo: Kimie Nishikawa)

Lighting

Lighting rendering of opening, by Yuki Nakase

Lighting rendering of Ishtar scene, by Yuki Nakase

Photos from the show

Opening scene

Shamhat taming Enkidu

---he people challenging Gilgamesh

Enkidu and Gilgamesh fight

Gilgamesh singing about Ishtar's past lovers

Enkidu's death

Story of the flood

Final song

Gilgamesh poster, by Eva Mlinar